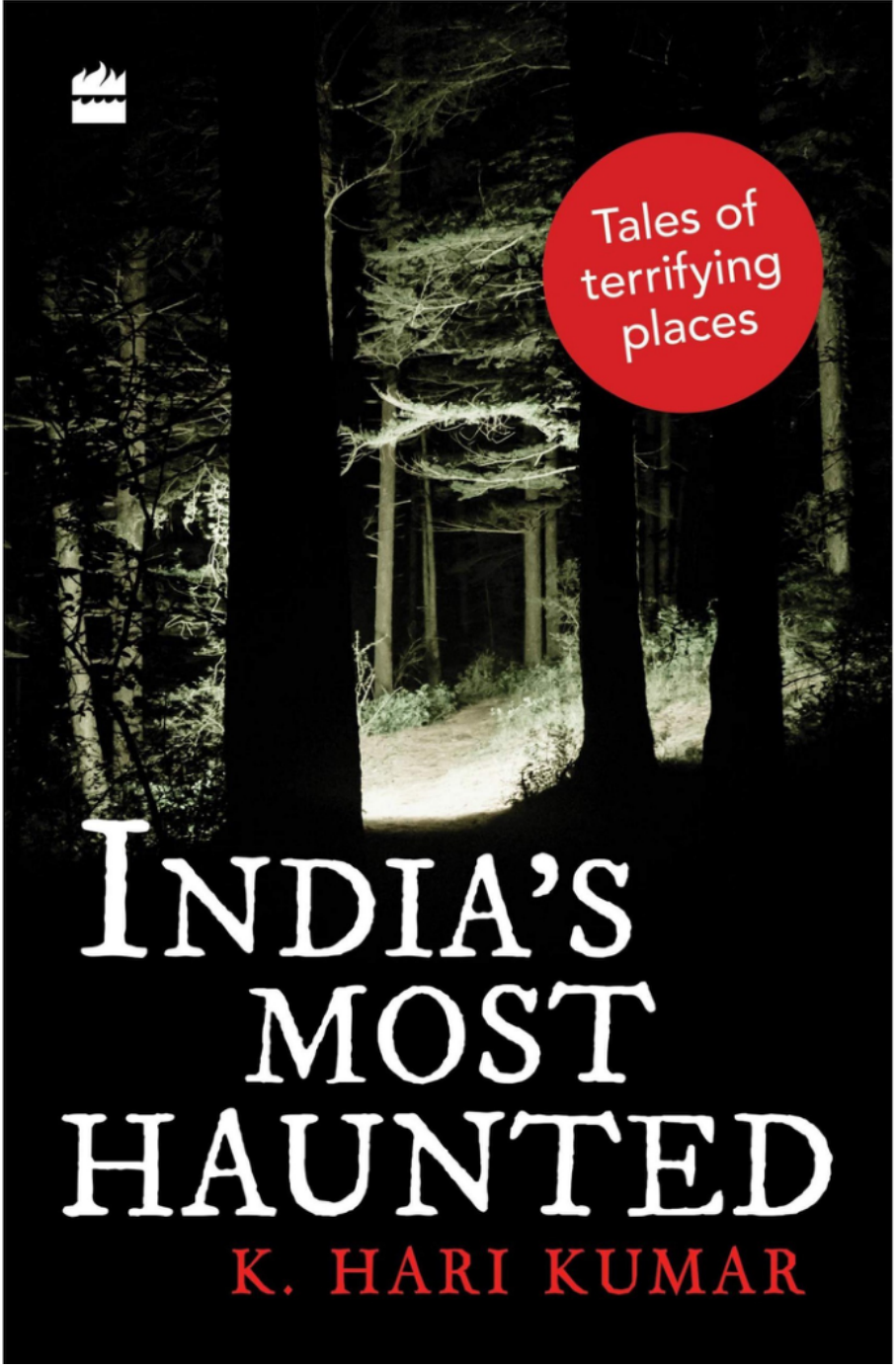

Tales of terrifying places
INDIA'S MOST HAUNTED
K. HARI KUMAR

India's Most Haunted

Tales of Terrifying Places

K. Hari Kumar

HarperCollins *Publishers* India

To Poori, Amma and Abba

Contents

Author's Note

The Devil's Flower and a Piece of Rock

The Man Who Loved Me

A Pair of Pale Hands

The Eleventh One

The Goat Head of Porter Hill

The Suicide Station of Kolkata

The Bloody River of Rohini

Doongerwadi's Tower of Silence

Melkotte Mohini

Darbhanga's School of Terror

Naale Baa

The Mills Have Eyes

The Headless Boy of Dow Hill

The Bloody Bride on Aarey Road

Pompu's Delusion

The Dahini of Manglojodi

The Dybbuk of Chendamangalam

A Night in Bhangarh

Kashmir's Killer Rivulet

The Nun's Last Cupcake

Muhnochwa

The Final Song of Dumas

Writer's Block

Purge

Seven Minutes in the Mall

All of Them Witches!

Dead Reef on the Island of Ross

Taking of Peter Abraham

The Deity and the Drunkard of Kasaragod

The Haunting of Charleville Mansion

Sweet Dreams, Abbu

The Ghost Hotel of Agonda

Help Us

The Test of Time

A Night in Kulbhat

Satan and the Smoker

Soft Laughs

Strange Encounters in Sathyamangalam Forest

Abducted from Leh

The Devil of Guntur

A Possession in Belman

The Hitchhiker's Backpack

The Visitor at the National Library

The Bronze Soldier of Warangal

The Haunting of Bhuli Bhatiyari Palace

There Are No Ghosts in De Monte Colony

A Night Out in Sanjay Van

The Mahishi and the Prince of Pamba

Departure

The Brahmarakshas of Nallamala

Acknowledgements
Photographic Inserts
About the Book
About the Author
Copyright

Author's Note

Fear defines horror.

Almost everyone enjoys a good horror story. In moments of solitude in the rain, or with friends around a campfire, a tale about the supernatural can be the perfect form of entertainment.

While the stories in this book were inspired by rumours, news articles, famous incidents, personal experiences, etc., the names of people and some of the places have been changed. I have also exercised my creative freedom as a writer to add certain elements to each of these frightening stories—you know, the twists and turns and dialogues.

I have also kept an open mind when it comes to believing in the existence of the paranormal. To be honest, sometimes, it is the 'normal' that should be feared most. After all, throughout history, horrifying acts of violence and depravity have always been committed by the living. Horror, therefore, is not limited to the supernatural. That is why, in this book, you will find restless spirits, the extraterrestrial, rakshasas and truly evil human beings.

India has a wealth of frightening tales and urban legends, and now I invite you, dear reader, to enjoy some of the most terrifying among them.

Let's begin…

The Devil's Flower and a Piece of Rock

A haunting in rural Kerala

The supernatural and the otherworldly have always fascinated me thanks to my grandma's scary stories. I would spend my summer vacations at my grandma's place in Kerala, away from the hustle and bustle of Gurgaon. Then there was that particular year when the Monkey Man haunted my summer. The trip to Kerala, that year, was an escape from the dreaded urban legend. One evening, while I was accompanying my grandma to light a lamp by the banyan tree, I told her about the Monkey Man. I was expecting her to be in awe of him. To my surprise, she just shrugged and asked 'Is that all?' Noticing the disappointment on my face she said, 'Let me tell you the story of what happened in this neighbourhood.'

There used to be a movie theatre in my home town. Apparently, my great-grandfather was the owner of the cinema house, and it was called Krishna Talkies. It was the only movie theatre in the region, the next one being in the city of Trichur. It did not boast of air conditioning or cushioned seats like we see in our multiplexes these days. In fact, it did not even have a solid roof! The ceiling was thatched with dried palm leaves, and on the hottest days of summer one could actually see the sun peeping in through the gaps between the leaves.

The theatre was located near the junction that led to our village, and the front side faced the bustling highway that connected the city of Trichur with the historical town of Cranganore. The back of the place overlooked a vast stretch of uninhabited forest area that ended at the small Krishna temple built four hundred years ago by early settlers. The area near the temple was decently populated, however, the mile between the theatre and the temple was always deserted, especially after sunset. The people of the village were even afraid to enter the perimeter of the place as they believed it was haunted by a yakshi.

Yakshi were said to be benevolent celestial beings like the Devas. However, modern literature has brought them down to the status of churels, at least in Hindi folklore. A yakshi, in popular Malayalee culture, is an enchantress who roams around in secluded places at midnight wearing a flowing white saree. They were painted as voluptuous beings with sharp eyes. They were also known to smell of paalapoo, the flower of a tree which is rightfully called the devil's tree in English.

Yakshi are said to prey on single men travelling on lonely roads at night. They lure them with their beauty and then feast on their

blood. People leaving Krishna Talkies after the second show wouldn't dare linger to stand behind the theatre for fear of the yakshi.

It was the fifth day of April 1957 when the Communist leader, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, was sworn in as the first chief minister of Kerala. That day marked a new chapter in world history, when a communist government was elected democratically. However, far away from the local celebrations, Kalyanidevi was only waiting for the arrival of her husband, Madhava Menon. Madhava, just like his comrades, had spent the entire day at the party office celebrating the Communist Party's grand victory. The fever of the triumph had gone to the man's head so much so that he had already started making plans to revolt against the local landlord, who was none other than my grandma's father.

Madhava's family had been working as caretakers of the landlord's estate for a little over three generations. Madhava believed that it was finally time to fight against the oppression. After the last show for the day, my great-grandfather would send his brother to count the day's collection at the box office and bring it home. On that particular day, the latter was unavailable for he had gone to Triprayar to attend a relative's wedding. Thus, the duty had fallen on the ideologically charged Madhava Menon.

As dark clouds gathered in the sky, Madhava arrived by the last bus at about half-past eleven in the night. People had already left after the second show and the gate was locked. The puny man held the rusty chain wound around the gate's latch and knocked it against the metal. Once, twice and then the third time. Velappan, the manager and usher, knew the signal and he immediately came out with a lantern and a leather pouch. He tiptoed towards the gate and unlocked the chains.

'I thought you would go home and not come here tonight,' said the dark-skinned Velappan. 'I'm glad I don't have to spend the night here.'

'The celebrations lasted a little longer than expected,' the caretaker responded in his baritone. 'And how could I not come? I'm forced to follow the orders of that oppressive landlord.'

'I heard your mother's taken ill and Kalyanidevi is alone.'

'Yes, but the landlord is heartless. He doesn't care about the lives of workers,' Madhava complained as he walked through the gate.

Velappan handed him the leather pouch. 'Well, you are her husband. If you cared about her, you wouldn't have left for the celebration at the town hall, would you?'

'How could I forget? You're one of the many loyal dogs of the landlord. As long as people like you wag their tails, society will never be rid of its illness. Our victory today is a sign that things are going to change for the better in this region. The revolution has begun.' The man, clad in a white dhoti and cotton shirt, announced the last sentence with unrestrained pride.

'Ayyo! I do not know about all this 'revolution' business. I'm just a simple man trying to make ends meet, and I'm forever indebted to the landlord for benevolently taking care of my family's financial needs.' Velappan paused to look at the theatre for a moment and then requested, 'Shall I go home now? My wife must be waiting.'

'Yes, of course. I don't want you to blame me for keeping you late.'

'Aren't you coming with me?' asked Velappan.

'No, I'm afraid I'll have to take the shortcut to save time.'

A flicker of fear appeared in the eyes of the usher as he inquired, 'But Madhava … why? Why in the world would you want to take the shortcut through the woods?'

'Because it's almost midnight and my wife is alone at home. The shortcut will get me there in ten minutes,' reasoned Madhava.

'But the route is haunted by the yakshi. No one dares to—'

Madhava interrupted, 'I don't believe in all that.'

'Madhavetta,' he called, adding the suffix for respect, 'the yakshi is a very smart being. She'll use paalapoo fumes and her curves to seduce you. Then, she'll figure out a way to taste your blood. After that, all you'll get is a quick glimpse of her fearsome expression before she grows fangs and drains your blood. By dawn, you'll be food for the vultures.'

'Look, I love folklore, Velu … but only in books and in the movies. Otherwise, it's plain superstition. And if I find one'—he picked up a large piece of grey granite from the ground and spoke with assurance—'I'll knock her out with this. Yakshis are afraid of granite. Aren't they?' He chuckled.

Bewildered, the other man offered his lantern to the brave communist. 'Please carry this with you. They can take any form at will, so beware!'

'Of course, I could use the light.' He dropped the piece of granite and took the lantern from the usher.

The usher stepped outside the gate and locked it. As Madhava walked towards the back of the theatre, the usher prayed for his friend's safety.

‘Bloody fool!’ Madhava muttered aloud, thinking about Velappan and laughing as he walked further into the woods. The theatre building slowly disappeared behind the trees, which soon surrounded him. Madhava looked up at the sky, which resembled a psychedelic painting. The moon was a perfect crescent and the thick shroud of grey clouds sailed drowsily in the dark sky. Occasionally, a white flash lit up the sky for a second before thunder rumbled in the distance.

I should hurry and get there before the storm hits, Madhava thought, as he picked up pace. The faster he walked, the more violently his lantern swung.

A flutter of batwings. Chirping crickets. The hoots of an owl. Even a jackal howled in the distance, adding to the nocturnal sounds. The clouds got darker and the thunder louder. He was almost running then, his pulse beating fast. Soon, he could see the place where the forest came to an end. His house was just a hundred yards away. Suddenly, something pierced the heel of his right foot. The lantern fell and broke, sending the burning wick crashing into the red clay soil. Madhava screamed with pain as the light dimmed and melted into darkness.

He couldn’t see, but he heard it: jingling anklets. He sat up, his foot still hurting. A speck of warm light was hovering in mid-air, coming towards him.

‘Who’s there?’ Menon asked, keeping his tone firm and clear.

‘Madhavetta?’ a female voice asked.

Madhava was startled for the voice was familiar. It was sweet as a jackfruit as well as sharp as the thorns on its skin. He narrowed

his eyes to focus in the dark, trying to see the face behind the light. The mesmerizing aroma of paalapoo sent a wave of pleasure sweeping over him. And then the clinking of anklets stopped as the female form stood next to the injured man. She knelt down and in that dim yellow light of the lantern, Madhava saw the beautiful face of his wife, Kalyanidevi.

'What are you doing here?' he asked, surprised.

'I heard you scream,' Kalyanidevi said. 'I … I came looking for you.'

'Now that you're here, help me get rid of this thorn. It's piercing the life out of me!' Madhava commanded his wife in his usual assertive tone.

'Let me see.'

She put down the lantern and placed Madhava's foot on her lap before bending forward to pull out the thorn. He noticed the contours of her voluptuous breasts, her cleavage accentuated by the play of light and shadow. He had never seen his wife like this in the three months of their marriage. Perhaps it was the very first time he realized the bodily beauty of the woman who had been sent off with him, or was it the aphrodisiac odour of the paalapoo…? And then he saw it, a flower plucked from the devil's tree adorned the back of her hair, just where she had pinned the braids.

She'll use paalapoo fumes and her curves to seduce you…

The words of Velappan reverberated in Madhava's head. Quickly he moved away, pulling back his foot. The thorn came loose in her hand, along with drops of blood. Madhava stared at Kalyanidevi.

'What happened, dear? Why are you looking at me like that?' she asked as she licked the blood off her fingers.

'Yuck! Why did you do that?' he asked in disgust.

'My aunt always says one mustn't let blood drop in a forest. It attracts wild beasts,' she replied innocently.

She'll figure out a way to taste your blood…

Once again Velappan's words started playing on Madhava's mind.

Kalyanidevi crawled towards her husband and gently planted a kiss on his cheek. There was a timid smile blooming on her face, and in the flickering light of the lantern, she looked more attractive than ever.

'Let us go home quickly. Since your mother's away, we have the whole house and the night to ourselves.' She kissed him on the other cheek before continuing. 'In fact, it's beautiful out here. I

don't want to go home,' she said and unpinned her hair. The devil's flower fell to the ground. A cold wind blew the flower into the darkness and a bolt of lightning lit up the sky, sending shivers down the spine of a man inching away from a woman in the forest.

By now it was clear that the woman was not his wife.

They can take any form, so beware!

Madhava prayed those weren't the last words he was going to hear from the usher, Velappan. He wanted to escape. He tried to get up but the pain did not allow him. The woman came rushing to hold him and another bolt of lightning struck a nearby tree. Helplessly, he looked around and saw a piece of grey granite lying near the roots of a jackfruit tree. He crawled towards it and grabbed it with his left hand. Without even waiting to take aim, he smashed it on the head of the enchantress. She screamed at the top of her voice and then fell to the ground. The rain started pouring and Madhava scrambled up and ran towards his house. He ran for his life. He didn't have the courage to turn back even once. He could hear the woman scream and cry in pain.

Madhava reached the entrance of his house, leaving a trail of the blood that was dripping from his foot. He limped but somehow managed to reach the door. He knocked twice, three times. Restlessly, he continued pounding on the door. Nobody answered. The rain was falling harder than ever and nothing could be heard over the sound of the storm. He could not even hear the screams. His heart was beating so fast that he eventually started feeling dizzy and then blacked out.

When he came to his senses, birds were chirping. He could hear whispers and murmurs. Madhava Menon opened his eyes to a gloomy morning devoid of sunshine. He saw Velappan and a few more villagers. He turned towards the door and noticed it was latched from the outside. Madhava gave Velappan a confused look.

'What did you do last night?' Velappan asked. There was grief on his face, in his tone.

'You will not believe what happened!' Madhava got up and shook Velappan by the shoulders.

'You're right. We can't.'

'I … I have slain the yakshi!' Madhava claimed victoriously.

Velappan grabbed Madhava's left hand and started walking towards the forest with him. The villagers followed. A few

hundred yards later they reached a spot where several more villagers had gathered along with three police inspectors. Velappan pushed through the crowd. The sight that greeted him left Madhava shocked.

His wife, Kalyanidevi, was lying there lifeless … and the blood that had spurted from her head flowed like a tributary towards the pond near the temple. Madhava could only stare. The rock he had used to kill her was lying near the dead body.

My grandma finished the story and looked at me. Her eyes were gleaming with a sentiment that I could not understand then. I had plenty of questions to ask but I simply stood there holding the lamp.

'Why don't you pass me the lamp?' my grandma requested as we reached the memorial site.

I handed over the lamp. She placed it on the rock and lit a matchstick.

'Years passed, governments changed, the theatre was closed and the land reforms forced my father to write off the land. The forest was cleared and now you have the shopping complex and the new post office there,' she continued. 'But Kalyanidevi's cries can still be heard on the fifth night of May every year, for her spirit still grieves. A tantric was called to ward off any evil from the spirit,' she said, lighting the lamp and placing it on the ground.

'What happened then?' I asked, stunned, looking at her.

She looked at me with a gentle smile and revealed, 'Her spirit was captured and lured into the rock that was used to kill her. To

honour her, we were asked to place a lamp at the rock every year on the fifth day of May since then.' She looked at the grey-coloured granite rock which reflected the light from our lamp. Without looking away from it, she asked, 'You know the date today, don't you?'

The haunted basement of a shopping complex in Gurgaon

7 August 2019

The downpour had started earlier than expected. It was about half-past five in the evening, though it was darker than midnight. The drops of rain prickled on the surface of the wet asphalt of the road connecting Jaipur Highway with Sohna Road. An Innova SUV drifted over the highway, splashing rainwater over passers-by.

'Dude, calm down. At least don't drive rashly today. It's a big day for you, right?' advised Lakshay, the round-faced, squat little man sitting on the passenger seat of the Innova.

'How do you expect me to calm down? I'm still not sure I'm doing the right thing,' said Aarav, who was driving just over 100 kilometres an hour.

'You're going to propose to Shreya tonight. That is the right thing, and we all know what her answer is going to be. But you will be able to do it only if you get there alive and in one piece,'

Lakshay said, looking at the needle of the speedometer that was gingerly touching 120.

Aarav Anand had turned twenty-six a couple of months ago, and he was already planning to ask for his long-time girlfriend Shreya Sharma's hand in marriage.

Aarav first saw Shreya on fresher's day, at his engineering college. He had fallen in love at first sight with the timid, fair-skinned girl, who was wearing a red top and peach skirt. What started as a ragging exercise ended up being their first date, and since then they had been in a relationship that made many people jealous. And tonight, after six long years, Aarav had invited Shreya to a pub in Metropolitan mall on M.G. Road, where he was going to ask the big question.

The rain fell harder, and the wipers struggled to maintain visibility even at the highest speed. It was getting difficult under such circumstances, but Aarav did not slow down.

That was when something hit the glass. Aarav slammed the brake and pulled the steering sharply to the right. The SUV came to a stop, and the sound of the rain drumming on the roof of the car remained the only sound for a long moment.

'What in the world happened? Did you kill someone?' Lakshay asked.

Aarav and Lakshay looked anxiously at the red trail of blood from the windshield to the bonnet, where a dark object lay motionless. It was a crow. Aarav picked up the yellow umbrella from the back. He opened the door and then the umbrella as he stepped out in the rain. Lakshay watched from inside the car as

Aarav removed the lifeless bird from the bonnet. As his hand touched the feathers, the crow suddenly stood up on its talons and flew off cawing. The sudden movement left the lanky Aarav shocked. The blood on the bonnet was being washed away by the rainwater. Aarav sat back in his seat. He took a deep breath.

'Glad that damned thing didn't die. Would have been a bad omen,' Lakshay opined.

'First you were worried about speeding and now you're being superstitious. What will you do in life, man?' Aarav said, when his phone started to ring, blasting Rob Zombie.

He answered it. 'Hi Arjun, what happened?' Aarav answered without wasting any time.

There was no response, only the crackling of static.

'Hello? Arjun?' Aarav spoke louder.

'Aa … Aarav…' A man's voice hissed in between.

'Arjun?'

'Aarav … I've a huge problem … p—please help me.'

'What happened? Tell me! Hello?'

'Just come. It's an emergency!' Arjun stressed from the other side.

'I … I'm going somewhere right now—'

'Please, man. I need you! I can't trust anyone else,' Arjun pleaded.

Aarav sighed. 'Okay. Where are you?'

The words brought an expression of discomfort to Lakshay's face. Aarav strained to listen over the static. 'Where, Arjun?' Aarav asked again.

'… behind the old market in South City … our usual zone.'

'Okay, I'll be there in ten minutes.' Aarav was about to hang up when Arjun urged: 'Please, come alone. Nobody should know about this—not even Lakshay.'

The line went dead.

Aarav placed the phone on the dashboard. Lakshay looked at his friend, confused.

'What happened?' Lakshay asked.

'It was Arjun … He has called me to our old adda. Seems like he's in trouble.'

'When isn't he? Why are you still friends with that coke-head!'

'I promise this is the last time!'

'Seriously, like, what keeps you two together? Don't tell me he's

your foster-brother or something,' Lakshay remarked with disappointment.

'He was my best friend.'

'Exactly. He was! Now, you are ruining the most important day for a drug addict. It is 5.45 p.m.,' Lakshay said, glancing at his wrist watch, 'and we're supposed to reach the pub by 6.30.'

'Look, Lakshay, just get out of the car and go to the pub. Keep the party alive until I come. I promise I'll be there in twenty minutes max!'

'You want me to get out now? Here?' Lakshay looked at the deserted road and asked, 'How am I supposed to get to M.G. Road?'

'Hire a goddamn Uber or something.' Aarav clicked the button to unlock Lakshay's door.

'I'm taking the umbrella,' Lakshay said angrily before he got out with it.

Aarav drove with too many thoughts fighting for his attention. He worried about the proposal, the party and the unseasonal rainfall. At the end, his fear for Arjun won out.

Arjun had tried his best but couldn't get into Aarav's college due to poor grades and financial constraints. As a result, Aarav made new friends and moved on with his life, while Arjun isolated himself. The separation took its toll on Arjun, and his cocaine addiction tightened its hold on him. He overdosed a year ago, and the very memory of it worried Aarav.

Aarav's SUV entered the pocket road that led to South City and after passing a clump of large, sprawling trees, he arrived at the

back of an abandoned shopping complex. He parked the car under an awning and got out. The place was damp and reeked of something like sulphur.

It had been a long time since Aarav last visited this place. The construction of the building started in 2005, amidst protests from local residents who claimed that it was being built over a burial ground. However, a few weeks later, a worker fell off the roof and died. This created panic among other workers and, eventually, the site was abandoned. Teenagers were never bothered by such superstitions. In fact, the ghost story had become a great excuse for them to explore the place. The complex became the perfect zone for troubled adolescents to smoke, drink and make out. Aarav and Arjun were among the first to claim the area as their favourite smoking spot.

'Arjun?' Aarav called out as he walked past unfinished brick walls. His voice echoed back at him. He noticed plumes of smoke rising from the southern side and walked towards the source.

'Arjun, are you there?' he asked. He saw no one—not even fresh cigarette stubs to suggest someone had been there. The spot was eerily empty, but he could definitely feel a presence. Irritated, Aarav put his hand inside his jeans' pocket, only to realize that his phone was not there. He decided to go back to his car.

Finally, he turned back and saw him. Arjun was standing there, staring at him like a madman. 'Hello, Aarav,' he said. 'Long time, no see …' He broke into a chuckle.

'What the hell?' Aarav recoiled in shock, glaring at the thin man he could barely recognize. 'Man, you scared me!'

Arjun's laughter became hysterical.

'You said you were in trouble.'

'That I am.' Arjun clarified between fits of manic laughter.

'Then why are you laughing like a lunatic? Have you lost your mind?' Aarav was agitated.

'Laugh away at those tiny little problems or they will laugh at you …' he responded.

'Why did you call me?' Aarav asked.

'You seem to be in a hurry, Aarav,' he teased.

'Look, you know very well what my plans were,' Aarav tried to explain calmly. 'It's an important day. I'm going to propose—'

'Yet I am not part of that day. You chose to ignore me completely,' Arjun interrupted. 'And what would happen once you propose … you only have two outcomes. Either she will say yes … or she will say no.' The man looked piercingly into Aarav's eyes.

'What are you implying?'

'What if she turns you down, disappoints you? What if she says no?'

'I will die…' said Aarav, despite himself. His eyes were welling up. He looked away, towards a seeping wall. When he turned back, Arjun was gone.

'Now that's convenient,' Arjun said from behind him.

Aarav turned around and noticed that Arjun was seated on a wooden platform.

'When you love someone, but they don't love you back … you will die of heartbreak,' Arjun continued, 'But what about those who don't receive your love? Should they end their lives because of heartbreak too?' This time, his eyes showed no hint of anger or spite. There was no laughter either.

'Are you trying to say that … that you have feelings for Shreya too?'

'Shreya? You, of all people, think I have feelings for that tiny little waif who cakes her face with makeup before stepping out of her bedroom? Really, Aarav?'

'Then what is it?'

Once again Arjun chuckled, getting up from the wooden platform as Aarav walked across the floor, towards the crazy man.

'For God's sake, what is your problem?' Aarav pushed Arjun.

Arjun regained his balance and grabbed Aarav by the collar. He whispered, 'You are my problem and I can't get rid of you.' His mouth closed in on Aarav's ear. 'Yes, Aarav, I love you…' he breathed, as thunder rumbled outside.

Aarav backed away, shocked. Was it his childhood friend or was he some kind of a psychopath speaking?

'What are you saying, Arjun?'

'I've always been there for you, ever since I can remember,' Arjun said.

'Yes, we were friends…' Aarav tried to explain.

'We were friends until you left me for that girl, Shreya. Do you even think of me? Ever?' Aarav went on.

'We were friends and that is all we have ever been.'

'What about when we shared our things?'

'Arjun, you are sick. You need help. I'm leaving now—don't you dare contact me again.'

Aarav turned and began walking away when Arjun grabbed his left hand and pulled him against the wall. Aarav's back hit the

moist surface and Arjun punched him in the gut. Blood spurted from Aarav's mouth as Arjun laughed.

'If the one you love doesn't love you … then that one should die … not me…' Arjun hissed and threw another blow his way.

Aarav used all his energy to duck and then crawled through the debris before getting to his feet. Without turning back, he ran out of the complex and into his car. He locked the door. The rain continued to pour. He was about to start the car when the banging started. Jolted, Aarav looked at the window expecting the deranged Arjun. But it was not him.

'Open the door!' said Lakshay, who was dripping wet.

Aarav composed himself and looked into Lakshay's eyes. It was only when Lakshay knocked on the window again that Aarav unlocked the doors. Lakshay got in and closed the door.

'What are you doing here?' Aarav inquired.

'I accidentally took your phone with me,' Lakshay said as he gave the phone back to Aarav and continued explaining. 'Moments after you left I received a call on it from the Sector 56 police station. There was an accident on Jaipur highway and a man lost his life. His body was severely damaged—they couldn't even tell his nose from his jaw. But they found your contact number in his wallet, and an ID card.'

Aarav stared at Lakshay, terrified of what would come next. Somehow he knew.

'It was Arjun. He was on his way to see you but he met with an accident. I thought it was important to tell you, or you would have waited for nothing. Since you didn't have your phone, I thought I'd come and inform you.' Lakshay paused to sigh and then added apologetically, 'I'm sorry for your loss, Aarav.'

Aarav went silent for the next few seconds.

'You know, it's quite strange. The police mentioned that the accident must have occurred between 5 and 5.30 p.m.' Lakshay looked at his friend. 'But didn't he call you at 5.45 p.m.?'

Another thunderclap. Aarav's blood ran cold as he heard laughter from inside the shopping complex.

'Let's get the hell out of here,' Aarav said, starting up the car.

As the SUV sped out of the place, the laughter followed Aarav.

Even today, people whisper about the hysterical laughter coming from within the abandoned shopping complex.

A Pair of Pale Hands

A tale of terror from Mangalore

Many would agree that weddings are more fun for the guests—who eat and drink and gossip to their hearts' content—than the couple getting married.

This is especially true for middle-class Hindu weddings, where the wedding parties make an effort to show off how much they can spend—which is usually more than they can actually afford. After one such wedding, where I had the honour of being the groom, I travelled to my wife's ancestral home in Udupi, a place filled with chilling and gripping stories of the paranormal.

Accompanying us in my father-in-law's white Innova were my yet-to-be-acquainted sisters-in-law. While Amritha and Archana were my wife's sisters, Radhika was a distant cousin who, for some reason, looked a little uneasy.

The NH 66 connected Mangalore and Udupi. The road was newly constructed and the relentless rain gave it a pitch-black appearance. Traffic was mild on the poorly lit highway, and the rain had subsided to a drizzle.

The girls looked excited but some kind of country shyness seemed to keep them from speaking. Amritha, who was usually talkative, was pinching my wife's left arm, and my wife kept shrugging her off.

‘What happened, Ammu?’ I asked the restless sister-in-law. That is what we called her.

‘Nothing!’ the girl replied. ‘Just rubbish.’

‘Come on, try me. If it’s rubbish I will let you know,’ I insisted, bored of sitting quiet.

‘Is it true that you have seen ghosts?’ the nineteen-year-old girl asked with the curiosity of a six-year-old.

I always expected such questions from people who were meeting a writer of horror stories for the first time. A positive response would no doubt excite them into a conversation. Nevertheless, there was another hour of driving left and a discussion would be a welcome change. Especially one about ghosts.

‘Well, I haven’t seen any ghosts per se, but I have had paranormal experiences a couple of times.’ I lied, as usual, as a bolt of lightning struck somewhere in the distance. Conveniently, it lit my face up with an eerie white light and set the mood.

‘Like in the movie Paranormal Activity?’ the girl asked.

‘Well, not really. There’s no way to know if it had anything to do with ghosts at all. Could’ve been my imagination or a number of other things,’ I gave my usual disclaimer before I began narrating the incident.

‘Basically, you are going to make up a story … full of lies,’ said the distant cousin who had been silent for longer than anyone else. For a girl of sixteen, her voice was quite deep. Since it was dark, I could only catch glimpses of her face when passing a streetlight, which were few and far between.

The other girls seemed to ignore the distant cousin.

‘It’s okay,’ I said, ‘seems like you have a better story to tell.’

‘It’s not a story. It is a real incident that happened last week,’ the girl shot back.

‘Great! For a change, I’ll be the listener,’ I said.

Radhika's Story

Punarur, Karnataka

Two weeks ago

Radhika was an excellent classical singer and she was heading towards Mysore for the annual state-level Carnatic competition along with other participants from her district: three girls, three boys, a teacher and driver. They had set out in an old jeep at about 8 p.m., so that they could avoid peak hour traffic congestion that built up in the daytime.

En route was the small village of Punarur, which was famous for the Vishwanath temple. Only a few miles away, there was a small halli—or hamlet—with a small population. There were only a few huts scattered on either side of the road.

'Stay close, guys, this is the halli where Narkasur was slain by Lord Shiva. It is believed that the spirit of the asura still haunts this place,' Pallav, one of the boys, said.

'Sir,' said the driver, 'do not take his name. You might invoke him. If you do, then you will bring doom upon all of us.'

'Oh, shut up. It's just a myth.' The teacher, who was about forty with pale yellow skin and a lean figure, dismissed the idea.

Suddenly the jeep started jerking on the bumpy road. The roaring of the old diesel engine was replaced by the chirping of crickets in the silence of the night. The terribly thin driver got out and opened the bonnet, releasing plumes of hot fumes. From inside the car he looked like an apparition: a form shrouded by the screen of smoke, lit by a lonely streetlight.

'Sir, the engine is blown. The jeep will have to be taken to a mechanic,' he told the teacher.

'Where will we find a mechanic at this hour?' the teacher said, noticing the peculiar scar on the driver's cheek. It was not noticeable until now, as only his left side faced the teacher while driving.

'The nearest garage is about twenty kilometres from here. I will go there and bring a mechanic. All of you can wait here,' the driver suggested.

'You don't expect us to wait here in the open, do you?' Radhika said. 'This is an eerie place. I can feel it in the air, there's something wrong.'

'Great!' the teacher turned to the driver. 'See? This is what happens when you scare kids with those stupid stories. Go find a mechanic. I'll see if I can accommodate everyone in one of these houses. I'm sure the villagers will be understanding enough.'

'Sure, sir,' the driver said and started walking away from the streetlight, into the darkness.

The teacher knocked on a couple of doors and finally convinced a resident to take in the kids and provide shelter to them until the driver returned with the mechanic. The house—or whatever was

left of it—was the dwelling place of an old, hunchbacked woman of about ninety. She looked frail and the long, bamboo cane she carried stood as crooked as her. Together they cast a shadow so frightening on the wall under the light of the kerosene lantern that the girls held on to each other tightly. They sat close to each other as the woman spoke to them.

'Nobody should go outside after midnight,' she warned and then looked at the boys and the teacher, who sat near the door. 'If you have any cuts or wounds, please cover them with a dry cloth.'

She walked slowly towards the window and looked outside.

'What's wrong with wounds and cuts?' the teacher asked.

The old woman did not answer, and the teacher and the boys looked at one another in confusion, before being startled when she finally spoke again.

'Because the smell of blood attracts it,' she hissed, staring into the night. 'It possesses its victims through blood and then uses the body to kill people, taking the soul back to Naraka. Its spirit reeks of vengeance.' She finally pulled in the shutter, closing the window. She turned around and warned, 'Beware, those who bleed—he or she must be burnt alive before the asura takes possession of the body. Show no mercy, or your own lives will be in danger.'

It was half-past midnight and there was no sign of the driver. The old woman was asleep on her thatched mattress, and her snoring was the only sound in the small room where the girls sat close to each other on a blanket and the boys sat against a wall. The teacher was almost asleep in his corner.

'Do you really think there's an asura around here?' one of the girls asked.

'I don't know,' said Radhika.

'What if it killed the driver?'

'Can we stop talking about it? I'm not feeling well,' Radhika said.

'What happened?'

'My stomach … It's aching.'

'Mine too. It's probably that dosa we had in Mangalore. This house doesn't even have a toilet. How do these people live here, anyway?'

'I'm sure the old woman hardly gets the urge,' the other girl commented.

Suddenly, there was a sound at the window—something had hit it from the outside. The sound startled everyone, though nobody moved. There was a short silence before someone started knocking on the door. All of them were scared stiff. The teacher woke up and approached the door.

That was when the shutter flew open.

No one uttered a word as they watched on with horror. It entered from the edge of the window: a white hand, thin as a bone. The nails were long and dark with filth. Radhika started crying, clutching her stomach as the other girls huddled closer to her, speechless. The old woman woke up at the sudden commotion. She took hold of her walking stick and unlatched the door. It opened to reveal a dark figure, thin as the crooked walking stick.

It entered.

'Sir, I have been knocking for such a long time. Why didn't you open the door? I would have died of the cold … or fear.' It was the driver. He stepped in with a spanner in his hand.

'We're so sorry. We thought it was…' the teacher stopped, realizing he was about to admit to being afraid because of the very stories he had ridiculed. He changed the subject. 'What happened? Did you find the mechanic?'

'Sir, I did not find any mechanic. But I decided to give it a try myself. We are lucky because I fixed the vehicle.'

The news brought relief to everyone.

'If you people are done with this, then please leave. You have spoilt my sleep already,' the old woman said.

'Yes, of course, Amma. It was very kind of you to give us shelter. We have to reach Mysore by eight in the morning. We will take

your leave now,' the teacher thanked her and left the hut, followed by the driver and the students. They kept close to each other, with Radhika holding her stomach in pain as they got into the jeep. As the jeep started up, Radhika realized something that sent a chill down her spine. Her cycle had begun despite the pill. She was bleeding.

Present Day

The Innova came to a stop with a sudden brake. My body was pushed forward by the force. The sudden jerk brought a momentary pause into the girl's story. There was a old woman in front of the car. She must've been trying to cross the road with a crooked bamboo cane.

As he slowly restarted the vehicle, I realized that my wife and her sisters were fast asleep. Radhika was sitting in the back seat looking at me with a piercing gaze, her eyes gleaming.

'Seems like your cousins have heard you tell this story a million times.' I chuckled.

'Like I said, it's not a mere story. It actually happened,' Radhika said, clearly offended.

'Well, what happened after that?' I asked, genuinely curious.

'You are a writer of horror stories. I believe you know exactly what would have happened. Why don't you complete it for me?' She challenged me, but somehow it seemed more like a sincere

request.

I took a deep breath and looked out at the stormy sky. I started my conclusion confidently, 'I … think the girl must have been possessed. She must've killed everyone in the car before making her way back to the settlement. I think the old woman and her neighbours stopped her and vanquished the asura's spirit by exorcising her.' I paused and turned back to look at the girl.

She was gone.

I got up to check if she had ducked to hide, but there was no sign of her. My movements had woken up my wife. The driver was looking at me in the rear-view mirror.

'What happened, dear? Did you lose something?' my wife asked.

'I … Dear, where's your cousin?' I inquired.

Archana and Amritha had woken up too.

'The one who was sitting with Amritha in the back,' I said.

'But no one was sitting with me, Jiju,' Amritha said.

'There was…'

'… Are you alright?' my wife asked.

'Where did Radhika go?' I called out anxiously.

The name brought a wave of shock to their faces.

'Radhika?'

'Yes!'

'Radhika was supposed to come with us but she changed her mind at the last moment and decided to leave for Bengaluru with her parents,' my wife revealed. I clearly remember her saying that one of her second cousins, named Radhika, would be joining us on our way to Udupi. Since I had seen so many of her cousins at the wedding (about fifty of them), it was hard for me to remember their faces. So, when I saw the girl in the car's back seat, I assumed it was Radhika.

'Then who was the girl in the back seat. She was telling me a story of…'

'Dear, I think you were dreaming,' my wife inferred. She moved a little closer to me, gently kissed me on the cheek and said calmly, 'You were so tired that you dozed off the moment you sat in the car. We decided not to disturb you.'

'But I remember distinctly that there was a girl sitting behind with Amritha. She was narrating a story'—I was quick to correct myself—'recounting her experience of a haunting in Punarur.'

My wife let out a gentle laugh, as if relieved to hear what I had just said.

‘You’ve been thinking about your new novel a lot lately. Relax, it was a dream. We are almost there by the way.’

My wife and her cousins smiled as the car turned right and entered a narrow gravel road—typical of the countryside in this part of the world.

We reached my wife’s ancestral home at a little past nine in the night. My wife and her sisters went inside, excitedly greeting their grandmother. I was the last to leave. I took my laptop bag from the front seat and started walking towards the house when a shrill voice called out from behind me.

‘You saw her, didn’t you?’ It was the driver.

A chill ran down my spine when I noticed the scar on his right cheek.

‘She does that to me, you know,’ he added. ‘And sometimes to others too. She has latched on to me, follows me everywhere. She has done it to many others—drove them all mad. They all died, eventually. She chose me to be her last victim.’

‘Why?’ I gathered courage and asked.

‘Because that night … when she said she was bleeding, they all forced me to kill her because everyone feared for their lives. And I had to do it.’ His eyes welled up. ‘I had to kill her with my own hands,’ he said, holding up his pale palms.

A Haunted House in Burari

11 a.m., Burari

'Eleven people were found dead in the house. Neighbours, relatives, friends—everyone is shocked. They were a happy family, according to those who knew them,' said the twenty-six-year-old charming reporter, on one of India's most popular news channels. She gave one final look at the camera and added, 'with cameraperson Sanjeev Jha, this is Paromita Biswas for Manorma 24x7.'

Despite the heat and dust, a stream of curious bystanders and eager reporters had gathered outside Delhi's 'house of horror'. Everyone was waiting to hear from the forensics team that had gone inside with the investigating officers. The mysterious nature of the deaths had led to many theories. The press was having a field day.

With long strides, Paromita walked past the crowd. A bunch of eager reporters looked at her in awe.

Interns! She thought, doing what she did best—ignoring them.

Paromita had advanced quite quickly in her career and was the prime-time face of the channel. Her channel's competitors tried everything to lure her, but she kept waiting for the right time to make the big switch. She had forgotten that she was also an intern once, sincere and dedicated to a cause. That cause was now replaced by greed for wealth and lust for recognition. She opened the gate and walked over to the crime scene. She knew the investigating officer quite well and thus, enjoyed the privilege of such proximity to the action.

The house smelled of decay, perhaps it was coming from those dull, patched walls. The living room was tightly packed with plush teakwood furniture. There were no idols in the house, no puja room. The living room, dimly lit by the light beaming through the tinted glass window on the eastern side, narrowed into a hallway lined with six bedrooms. Circle Inspector Ahlawat was standing right at that spot near the passageway where the light diffused into the darkness beyond. When he saw Paromita, an expectant smile spread on his face.

'I've been waiting since morning,' the inspector said.

'I'm here now. Tell me … what is it?' the journalist spoke contemptuously.

'I hope you won't forget my reward,' Ahlawat asked.

'Have I ever?' she countered sternly.

'That's why you're here.' The policeman turned and walked into the hallway. 'Come with me.'

She followed him into one of the rooms, where there were no cops.

'This was the old woman's room,' Ahlawat revealed, stepping away from the bed that lay in the centre.

'The one who was stabbed?' Paromita said, while entering the room with a sense of morbid fascination, trying to picture how it could have played out. Her eyes made note of the lone window, the really ancient-looking fan hanging from the ceiling and the rusted iron armoire with a full-length mirror on its door.

She then went ahead to touch the bed frame.

'No, don't touch it,' shrieked the policeman. 'Forensics has yet to go through his room.'

Slightly taken aback by the sudden warning, Paromita stepped away from the bed and pulled out a Marlboro Light from a pack in her shirt pocket.

'Mind if I have one?' she asked.

'You know you're the only media person allowed in here at this

stage. If I were in your place, I wouldn't do that,' he said, looking at the cigarette in her hand.

She clucked her tongue and put the cigarette back. She understood that the inspector was not having a great day with all the questions that were being asked by the media, government agencies and the general public.

'Serial killing, revenge murder, lynching, honour killing—what is it, Ahlawat?' she asked.

'Suicide,' the inspector replied matter-of-factly.

She was disappointed to hear that.

'I'll lose out on a sensational story. I mean, who wants to know why a family committed mass suicide.' She sighed. 'Unless they were farmers or something. I was hoping that this one had a serial-killer angle to it—a story like that would have viewers hooked for a week. Say, what about that tantric angle you mentioned yesterday?'

'Oh, we're not ruling that out yet.'

'What do you mean?'

'We found a journal—'

'Evidence?' she interrupted.

'Maybe … What's written in it is quite shocking. Intriguing too. It might make a great story, so I thought of sharing it with you.'

'I would have called that sweet … If I didn't know you were such a greedy bastard.'

'I just want my reward delivered at the paan-wallah's place outside my wife's boutique,' the inspector instructed.

'Fine. Spit it out now,' the reporter demanded. She did not want to waste more time.

The inspector looked flatly into the reporter's beguiling brown eyes. She was indeed a thing of mesmerizing beauty. Ahlawat, with his monstrous right arm, pulled out a small diary from his trouser pocket. It was the size of a Kindle reading device, about six inches in length and three or four in width. The cover looked like it was made of animal skin.

'I found this under the bed in the master bedroom. Before anyone else could see, I pocketed it. It's a pretty interesting read and might actually give you a great story that will keep TRPs up for months,' he said as he handed the diary over to the curious journalist. The thoughts about a briefcase full of brand-new currency notes awaiting him at the paan-wallah's shop gave him more motivation than the peanuts the government paid him at the end of every month.

‘Eleven people died in this house because of one man who thought he was being contacted by his long-deceased father from the other side,’ he said.

‘What are you saying?’

‘The diary says so. I read a few pages but then the ghosts drove me crazy.’

‘Maybe it’s your guilt giving you a pain in the head,’ the journalist said.

‘I have more journalists waiting for bait like this,’ he shot back raising his uniform’s collar with his right hand.

‘I’m sure they won’t offer you half as much as we do.’

‘Why don’t we call it even?’

‘Of course!’

‘I must say one thing: this family was plagued by some kind of mass hysteria.’

‘What do you mean?’ Paromita asked inquisitively, opening to the first page of the diary.

‘You know, psychotic thoughts that are transmitted from one mind to another. I mean, I cannot even imagine convincing nine other people to commit suicide, and add to it stabbing a poor old woman who could not get up from her wheelchair. They first killed her, then hanged themselves. It is all there in that diary of his, the eldest son. He was the one who claimed to have communicated with his long-dead father. Better read for yourself. Keep it hidden somewhere and get the hell out of here before my seniors arrive,’ Ahlawat said. ‘Read at your own risk.’

Paromita closed the diary and put it in her handbag. Ahlawat walked her out of the house before leaving in his police vehicle. He seemed to be in a hurry. Paromita got inside her channel’s van and left the scene. The weather outside had changed drastically and it was darker than before. A dust storm was inevitable.

10.11 p.m., Malviya Nagar

After ordering a pizza from Dominos, Paromita sat down at her study table in the little study at her home. The shot of vodka was the fifth one in a row. She started reading the diary. Akash Bhatti was the name of the man who had written it. Thirty-six years of age, Akash was never suspected of being psychotic. He led a normal life until that day, when he decided to end it for himself and ten others at his home.

Why would you do such a thing? Paromita asked herself as she started reading from the first page. It was exactly as Inspector Ahlawat had said.

Akash believed that his dead father had started contacting him from the beyond, telling him to prepare his family for moksha, salvation. In great detail, the man had described the procedure to attain said salvation—a suicide ritual.

Eleven souls at the eleventh hour of the eleventh month of the Sindhi calendar—all in the name of salvation. But whose salvation exactly? The journalist wondered as she flipped past the fifth page.

To her surprise, the page after that was blank, and so were all the pages that remained in the diary.

'Ahlawat, you greedy bastard!' she cussed at the inspector for giving her a half-baked piece of evidence. She wanted to call and cancel the deal that they had.

She felt a cold chill run down her spine, and it was not a breeze

blowing in from the window, which she had closed an hour ago. Suddenly, there were knocks at the door—urgent ones. She placed the diary on the table and went to answer it. Another round of knocks. Paromita felt uneasy.

Then she opened the door to a tall and lean pizza-delivery boy.

'Ma'am, your pizza,' he said, handing the box to Paromita.

Paromita took the box and gave him a fifty-rupee tip.

'Thank you, ma'am,' he said. 'By the way, your bell is not working. I pressed a couple of times before knocking.'

'I'll have it checked, thanks,' she said before closing the door.

It was the first time in months that she was not hosting the news debate, instead she was at home poring over the diary. The channel slipped into its final commercial break as she finished the pizza. Sleepy and feverishly cold, she got up from the couch, put away the empty pizza box and then went to back to the study, yawning.

She was surprised to find the window open. She closed it before noticing that the diary of Akash Bhatti was lying open on the table. Something was written with red ink in Hindi on the page which was blank just moments ago:

'Read this alone. You have been chosen…'

She slammed the diary shut, suddenly nauseous. Maybe it was the alcohol. Cautiously, she opened it again, to the same page. The words were gone. The page was perfectly blank. She let out a sigh of relief. Knowing that it was time to call it a night, she switched off all the lights and went to her bedroom.

11.01 p.m.

She felt like a surge of air had been forced into her lungs and got up from her sleep, heaving. Paromita looked around in the dark, sitting up in bed. She did not feel right. The air was too musty. The scent of sandal aerosol was replaced by one of natural decay. She looked around for her phone, but it was not under her pillow. She realized that it was not her pillow at all, neither was the bed. It was not her room. It was not her house.

It was the house of horror.

The bulb began to glow and she saw the face of a man in the mirror of the armoire. She had done enough research on the family to know who it was—Akash Bhatti.

'Welcome to my house, Paromita Biswas. We enjoyed watching you every night on the news. It is nice to see you in flesh,' the apparition spoke in a tone that echoed inside the bedroom, 'and soul.'

The blood inside the journalist's veins froze. Her eyes popped wide open as she tried to pinch herself awake.

'I am sorry, but you are not dreaming. I am sure that you would never have thought about this even in your worst nightmares,' he said.

'What do you want?' Paromita asked, trembling.

'The eleventh soul.'

'What?'

'Yes, we did something stupid. I was supposed to sacrifice eleven people at the eleventh minute of the eleventh hour in the eleventh month of the year. All suicides, by their own hand. Sadly, we had to put one to death—my old grandmother. Now, we are stuck in a place where you would never want to be. We need someone who will take their own life inside this house. I latched on to the book so that whoever found it would be our eleventh one.'

Paromita could not believe what was happening. She never believed in God, let alone ghosts. But right now, she wished she had a God to seek protection from. She started shifting her body towards the edge of the bed, in an effort to jump off and run out of the place. She got up suddenly and ran, screaming.

The door of the room slammed shut. She was trapped inside the room.

'You were already warned,' said the ghost.

Eleven people died in this house because of one man who thought he was being contacted by his long-deceased father from the other side. That's what is said in the diary, Ahlawat had said earlier, I read a few pages but then the ghosts drove me crazy.

'But … but I was not the first one … to find the diary,' she said between sobs.

'Indeed. The inspector was here last night. He was with us this morning. He could not escape, but he promised to give us another soul in exchange for his life.'

'Why can't you let me go? I will get you someone else,' the journalist pleaded.

The light started flickering in shades of red and blue.

'I think we've been patient enough. If I miss this chance, we will be trapped for the next eleven years. We do not want that. So, you have to cross over.'

'But I do not want to,' she cried. She looked at the ceiling and then yelled, 'Oh God, please save me from this nightmare.'

Her vision was blurred by tears, and after they were shed, she noticed that the light was restored to normal and that there was no ghost in the mirror. It was just her in the room. She exhaled in relief. Silence.

'Be it your way or mine, the end is inevitable,' the ghost whispered in her ear. Shocked she turned around and saw the ghosts of ten people—all those who had died in that house a few days ago.

'You must come … You have been chosen … It is time to cross over…' the ghosts said in unison and the sound reverberated in her ears as she banged on the door. She knocked harder and harder until her wrist snapped, splattering blood all over the floor and the door.

'You must come, you are the chosen eleventh soul…'

The chanting was all she could hear.

Ahlawat made a bargain with the ghosts and he made sure that he finished the task perfectly well. He arrived early in the morning, two hours before his call time. He found the dead body of the reporter lying in the bedroom. He packed her up in a black plastic sheet and then put her in the trunk of his vehicle. He cleaned up the blood that filled the area near the door and picked up the diary, which was lying on the bed. He then drove away. It was time to get rid of the evidence.

The journalist's spirit, now unable to communicate with the living as she had once done so well, was left to watch it all. She was the eleventh one.

Reema Sharma, an English teacher, had lost everything in that accident: her will to teach and her partner. A shadow of her former self, she lived alone with her depression.

The only things that remained with her were memories and her preference for wearing salwar-kameez. Recent hallucinatory episodes and thoughts of suicide forced her sister, Riya, to bring her to her husband's hill town in Shimla. Riya had married Tarun Thakur. Reema was welcomed warmly by her eight-year-old niece, Nysa. The young girl had showered her with rose petals when she stepped into their house.

The house was originally built by a British aristocrat in 1917, and was passed down to different people after 1942, until it was acquired by Tarun Thakur a few months ago. Anyone who saw the front would be reminded of old, gothic tales thanks to the stone walls, large trees with a swing hanging from one of them, the protruding chimney. Reema felt the same.

'Welcome to our humble abode,' greeted Tarun, who stood at a little above five feet and five inches.

'Thanks, jiju,' Reema replied, then turned towards little Nysa and said, 'and thank you, sweetie, for that wonderful welcome.'

The little girl smiled.

'Come now, let me show you the room,' Nysa offered and started walking up the spiral staircase.

Reema followed her into the lone upstairs bedroom. As the girl opened the door, a gush of cold air rushed out. The room felt old and untouched.

'Papa got it cleaned only for you. I was never allowed here,' the girl revealed as she jumped on the bed.

The room had wooden flooring and ceiling, with minimal furniture that included the mahogany bed, teakwood armoire, study table and a comfortable chair. Reema opened the armoire to store her travel bag. Inside, she saw an old typewriter on the bottom shelf. After placing her travel bag on the lower shelf, she took out the typewriter carefully and placed it on the table, which was placed against a large window. It was an old Corona Sterling typewriter. Reema was intrigued and after a long time, she felt like writing her life's tragic story.

'I thought you would love it, so I asked our maid to keep it while she was cleaning out the room,' said Tarun who had come inside. 'It still works.'

'Thanks. Whose typewriter is it?'

'Probably the previous occupant's. Who knows? This room was locked up for over twenty years, I guess. We're a small family and the bedroom downstairs is enough for us.'

'Interesting. I can't wait to start writing.'

'Good. So, why don't you freshen up, have dinner and then re-inaugurate it?'

'Of course,' she said, opening the window.

'Maybe I will also sing you some of my original rock compositions,' Tarun said enthusiastically.

'No, Papa! Please don't start with your old rock band songs. I don't like them,' little Nysa complained, 'they are just noisy!'

Reema laughed at her niece's interpretation of her father's college nostalgia as she watched the father-daughter duo walk out of the room, closing the door behind them.

Midnight

The clouds sailed past the dull moon as the sky flashed with lightning. Everyone in the house was asleep, but Reema kept tossing and turning in her new bed. She was unaccustomed to the place and the room. She was restless, as if she was having a nightmare. The moonlight crept in through the window, which was closed because of the strong wind, and cast a strange shadow over her face. The shadow watched over the writer as she woke from her sleep. Reema looked towards the window from her bed, but there was no one to be seen, just the moon peeping through the clouds. Suddenly, lightning flashed.

She sighed. It was another night when she dreamt of that dreaded accident that destroyed her happy married life. She wished, from the bottom of her heart, that her dead husband would come back someday. As she looked towards the window, she saw a glimpse of her dead husband's silhouette. As another bolt of lightning flashed, she realized it was just the clothes stand. She pretended that it did not matter and closed her eyes, but the thought would not go away.

She couldn't sleep, so she decided to write the story. She went back to the cupboard and took out some A-4 sheets from her bag. She quickly got back to the table and inserted the paper into the carriage of the typewriter. This was an older model that used a moving carriage, which consisted of a cylindrical platen, paper table, paper bail and some other parts. After setting the margins,

Reema gently pressed on the letter 'T'. The carriage moved to the left as she typed. She finished typing the title of her new book when thunder rumbled outside. The next minute, the power went out.

It wasn't unusual in that part of the country, especially during storms. As the lights went off, she decided to call it a night and got into bed.

As the writer pulled the blanket over herself and closed her eyes, the shadow arrived at the window. The shadow formed a distorted shape on her lovely face. Feeling odd, Reema opened her eyes to look around. The breeze coming in from the window made her restless. She remembered it being closed and got out of bed to close it again. As she pulled the panes together, she noticed a little girl standing near the tree. Before she could look at it, she was distracted by a series of knocks on the door.

She turned and walked towards the door. She turned on the flashlight on her mobile phone and opened the door, but there was nobody outside the room. She wondered if Nysa had knocked and gone back to her room. She decided to check on Nysa and started walking towards her room. She opened the door to her little niece's room only to find her sleeping peacefully with her parents. She closed the door and started walking back when she heard it again—rapid knocking. This time it was the front door.

Just when she reached the door, the phone's battery died and the source of light went off. In the darkness, she pulled the latch and opened the door but the door could not cross the safety chain. Before she could remove the safety chain, a girl's hand came in through the gap. Reema fell back and screamed in shock.

Woken up by the scream her sister, Riya, jumped out of her bed and came running to the front room where she found Reema on the floor and gasping for breath. Tarun followed Riya.

'What happened? What are you doing here?' Riya asked anxiously.

'I … I saw someone outside,' Reema said, pointing towards the door. She continued describing in despair, 'Her hand … it was all covered with … bloody hands…'

Tarun went towards the door and opened it by removing the safety chain. He looked around for a moment before returning.

'There is no one outside, Reema. You must have had a dream,' Tarun said as he closed the door.

Riya helped Reema get up and as she got up, she noticed a blood trail that went towards the door.

‘There … look!’ Reema exclaimed, pulling Riya by the arm, ‘Blood marks, I told you.’

Riya noticed them, but remembered that Reema was on her period, which she reminded her of once they were back in Reema’s bedroom.

‘Reema, you had a bad dream, that’s all. Maybe another hallucination. Did you take your medicines?’ Riya asked.

Reema looked bewildered as she walked up the stairs to her room with Riya. As the sisters went inside the room, there was Nysa, who had been watching everything as it happened. Ever since Reema arrived at their house, Nysa had started feeling that there was something weird about her aunt. For her young and innocent mind, scientific terminologies and psychiatric explanations did not make much sense. She was seeking an explanation in the unknown.

3 a.m.

Reema couldn’t sleep. Although the wind blew harsh and cold outside, the room was warm because she had closed the window. She had decided to write at least one chapter a day. To her horror, she saw the words ‘Help Me!’ typed on the page. She rubbed her eyes and when she looked again, it just had one letter, ‘T’, typed on it. Frustration led her to bang her fist on the bed where she was sitting.

In the darkness, she could only see when the lightning flashed

outside. Reema tried to meditate, as advised by her doctor. She felt like something was coming towards her but she did not open her eyes and tried to focus on her breathing. But suddenly she started feeling colder. She opened her eyes and saw the window was open.

'Who opened it?' Reema asked herself. She got up and tiptoed towards the window but on the way she heard knocks on the door. This was just like the sound she had heard earlier that night.

Who could it be? Is it the girl? I am sure I am not imagining all this, she told herself.

She went to the door.

As she reached the front door, she heard heavy breathing from the other side.

'Please, help me…' said a young girl's voice.

Reema immediately opened the door, but once again there was no one. She noticed fresh footprints on the muddy soil in the front yard. Reema closed the door and followed the trail that led her to the empty road on the eastern side of the house.

She walked further on the road until she entered a wooded area. She didn't know if she should continue when she heard the hooting of an owl. Her eyes watched the intruder, who was staring at her. Reema felt frozen when she saw someone running into the woods, it was a girl … the girl. Was it a hallucination?

Another flash of light appeared in front of her eyes, and everything was normal; there was no girl. Intrigued by the vision, Reema walked into the woods. She took the same path as the girl in her hallucination. As she walked through the path between towering trees, she could hear the whispering of a young man and the giggling of a girl. But she could not see anyone or anything except trees, grass, moss and the light of the moon peeping through the leaves and the occasional lightning flashes.

She reached a place from where she could see a lake beyond the woods. Something crashed behind the trunk of the tree to her left. Reema walked around and noticed that there was a wooden structure— a cabin. And outside the cabin there was a boy, hardly eighteen and in agony. Another hallucination.

'S … S…' he struggled to speak as he rested his back against the tree's trunk.

Reema looked at the boy, clueless.

'Seema…' he said, finally looking into the writer's eyes, 'run for your life!'

Reema was surprised, 'Seema? You must be mistaken…'

'Run!' he screamed at the top his voice, 'Don't worry about me.'

'Who are you?' Reema asked.

There was no reply, and she closed her eyes for a brief moment. When she opened them, he was gone. However, she noticed something on the branch. It was a necklace with a locket. Something was engraved on the back of the locket but she could not read it.

She opened the locket and saw a picture of the girl inside, the girl who had been haunting her ever since she had arrived at the place.

It started raining, and the drops of icy water fell upon her as she gazed into the girl's face in the locket.

Seema, run for your life! The boy had said. Why did the boy say that? Was Seema the name of the girl in the picture? What was she warned to run away from? Was there someone after her?

As Reema's mind started churning out theories, she heard wet footsteps approaching from behind amidst the sound of raindrops. Someone was coming.

Was that the one chasing the girl? Reema thought. A twig cracked on the ground, under the foot of a stranger. She gathered the nerve to turn around.

Reema screamed as she saw a terrifying masked man charging towards her. The colour of his skin was red, like it was painted with blood. His pointed canines gleamed under the light of the moon. It wasn't a man at all. It was the devil himself.

The devil pushed Reema to the ground and pounced on her like a lion preying on a timid deer.

'I'm not going to let you go tonight, bitch!' he hissed in his shrill voice.

Reema struggled and hit the devil on his face with her right hand. She could see that the red paint on his face had stained her hand. He then grabbed both her hands and sniffed her face.

'I have waited for long…' He locked eyes with her and said, 'Seema Behl…'

A tattoo of a goat's head was marked on the devil's palm and it stared at Reema coldly. A bolt of lightning struck the tree behind her and that flash forced her to close her eyes.

When she opened them, she saw a man on top of her. However, it wasn't the man with the red mask. This was the face of a man she knew well. It was Tarun, her brother-in-law. She couldn't believe her eyes. She looked at her hand, but the red paint was gone. She was back to normal.

‘What is wrong with you, Reema? What are you doing here all by yourself?’ Tarun asked with concern, trying to restrain her as she lashed out at him.

Reema stopped struggling, ‘I … I followed them. I don’t know.’

Reema could not feel her limbs and slowly she blacked out. Tarun carried her home.

When Reema gained consciousness she was seated on a sofa in her sister’s living room. She was bruised and her wounds were bleeding.

‘What were you doing in the woods?’ a concerned Riya asked.

‘What is more important is that I found her before she was eaten by some wild animal,’ Tarun interrupted as he brought over a first-aid kit. He unzipped the bag and took out the cotton wool and betadine solution to clean Reema’s wounds.

‘I think I should put a lock on your door so that you do not go outside in the night,’ Riya exploded as she saw her sister writhe in pain when the betadine solution touched her wound.

‘Didi, I swear I saw a girl, I heard her voice,’ Reema defended herself.

‘You are imagining it. Your doctor had mentioned…’

‘No, this was not like that. There was someone else too. A young boy…’ Reema recollected and added, ‘and a…’

Tarun interrupted Reema, ‘When I came there, I saw you struggling and fighting against yourself. There was no one else!’ He started walking towards his room, ‘It would be good if you just go to sleep. I have to leave for Chandigarh early in the morning.

Reema, try to speak with your doctor over Skype. You can't let this consume you.'

Reema decided to head back to Mumbai the next morning as the idea of a retreat at the hill station did not seem to be working for her. She did not want to be a bad influence on her sister's family, especially on the eight-year-old Nysa.

Next morning

'I am glad that you decided to leave. I'm sorry, but I don't want my daughter to be scarred by her aunt's insanity,' Tarun said, as he steered the car towards the airport. He was dressed in a black blazer, himself catching the same plane to Mumbai for his business meeting.

'I understand. I'm sorry too. But I am telling you that there is something wrong about that house or that forest on Porter Hill,' Reema reasoned.

'There is nothing wrong with the house. The woods just seem scary. Everything is in your head. You need proper medical attention.'

'I will be alright. I need time, but I will be alright. And trust me, I do not believe in all these superstitions, but what happened last night was beyond anything. I felt like I was living a chapter from someone else's life.'

'For you, everything is a chapter and all of us are mere

characters.'

'No, jiju. It was like someone was trying to tell me something. I felt it.'

'Please, Reema, try to move on. You are hallucinating more than before. Time to get it treated. Do you want me to send somebody with you?' Tarun offered as he parked the car and got out with his sister-in-law.

'No, thank you,' Reema replied.

The flight took off and, after a few hours, they touched down at Mumbai. Tarun walked Reema to the exit, where his cab was already waiting for him.

'Do you want me to drop you home?' he asked.

'No, thank you, Tarun. I will manage.' Reema replied, for the first time she had called him by his first name.

'Cool!'

Tarun hugged his sister-in-law. Into her ears he spoke coldly, 'And please, do not come near my family until you are normal.'

As he left her and started walking away, the thread at the edge of Reema's dupatta clung to the cuff button of Tarun's blazer. In an irritated manner, he started removing it when the skin on the inner wrist was revealed. Reema noticed something shocking: a tattoo of a goat's head.

The Suicide Station of Kolkata

Shreyoshi Chattopadhyay got off at the metro station. She felt as lonely as the station looked. She was still hurting because of the breakup message that she had received from her boyfriend earlier that day. She had had a little too much to drink on the way and now she was travelling home later than usual. A man who attempted suicide at the very same station was making headlines and a few people had claimed to have seen his ghost near a pillar overlooking the railway track, from where the man had jumped. He was a thirty-something-year-old man from Kalupara. Shreyoshi hated creepy stories, and at that moment she also hated men, thanks to her breakup. Her boyfriend was also from Kalupara, and in her present state of mind, that text was enough to malign his community and gender.

It was chilly, and the air inside the station was heavy. As she started walking out of the platform she started feeling as if some kind of a mist was covering the place and an uncomfortable cold wind blew through the metro station—as if a train had just passed by. The wind passed over her delicate body, which was not well covered with woollens. She shivered as she suddenly felt as if someone was calling her from behind. She was the last one off the train, so the very idea of there being someone behind her made her tremble with fear. She did not want to turn around as all the news reports came to mind. She hadn't forgotten any of the details she had read about or heard of.

Again, she thought she heard a voice from behind her. Her heart pounded louder, her breathing got heavier until she was absolutely sure that she had distinctly heard a voice. She stopped, closed her eyes, took a deep breath and turned around. Upon opening her eyes, she saw the figure of a man. He was short and heavy-built, skin red as copper, and was wearing a white pyjama and an unclean, cream kurta—which was stained with blood. All the ghosts from those horror stories she had read as a child started laughing in chorus, or so she imagined.

Is this the ghost of the man who committed suicide by jumping in front of a speeding metro? What was his name? She tried hard to remember but the alcohol played tricks with her mind, flashing gory pictures and scary ideas about the death and the ghost.

What was his name? Oh yes, his name was Shopan Ghosh, resident of Kalupara.

'Are you alright?' the person asked.

Shreyoshi looked at him in horror.

'Well, you left your phone on the train. I brought it for you,' he said.

'What?' she tried to ask, but her voice did not let itself out and she squeaked like a mouse.

'Your mobile phone,' the man put his right hand forth.

She saw the iPhone in his thick, red hands. She immediately recognized it as hers and gingerly took it from the mysterious person.

'Why are you shivering? Is it because of the cold or did you see a ghost?' He laughed out loud as if he had cracked a joke.

Shreyoshi kept staring at him blankly. She regretted having read all those articles on the suicide and drinking to cope with her emotions. Was she crazy or was she looking at a ghost? With a lot of effort, she asked him 'Wh—who … Who are you?'

'My name is Shopan, I live here … Kalupara. Are you going that side?'

Shopan! She thought. She knew she was looking at the ghost!

'Shopan Ghosh?' she asked.

Shopan chuckled in a sadistic manner while the girl looked at him in horror.

'No! My name is Shopan Sen. I am not the ghost, and I really don't believe in that bullshit news either,' he said and laughed again. However, this time his laughter did not seem sadistic to the girl.

Shopan Sen! She sighed in relief.

'Come, I will walk you out of here,' the man offered courteously.

Shreyoshi nodded, embarrassed now.

'I'm sorry, I was having a really bad day and the tequila got me tipsy,' she apologized.

'That's okay. Some things are not under our control. It was only natural for you to think I was a ghost, given how the media has been treating the news,' he said in an accusatory manner.

'Hmmm…' she agreed.

'Those people in the media, they have got it all wrong,' he said as the two took an exit and left the station.

'What do you mean?' she asked as the two walked out into auto stand.

'Well, for one, the man did not commit suicide. He tripped and fell in front of the train. For no mistake of his, the media is blaming the man. I am telling you, it is the government and metro authorities who are behind this. They want to hide their carelessness by calling it a suicide.'

'You seem like a Leftist,' she joked as she waved at an auto-rickshaw.

'How does it matter now, left or right?'

The auto-rickshaw arrived and Shreyoshi got in.

'Would you like to be dropped? I mean, that is the least I can do,' the girl offered with a smile. The auto-rickshaw driver looked at her uncomfortably, clearly, he was not in a mood to pick up a second customer at that hour of the night.

'No, I'm good. You take care and do not fall prey to what the media feeds you,' Shopan advised.

'Aye aye, comrade!' she let out a gentle laugh.

'Especially when they couldn't even get the dead man's name right.'

'Really?'

'Yes, the man was not Ghosh…' and then he whispered something which she could not hear as the auto-rickshaw driver interrupted the conversation.

'Can we go or are you waiting for someone?' the driver asked Shreyoshi.

'Just one second, na!' she told the driver and turned to her new friend but to her surprise, the man was gone. She felt a little offended because she was starting to like him.

'Can we go now?' the driver asked again.

'Yes!' she said a little distracted as he drove.

She peeped out of the side of the auto and looked for the man who had vanished.

'What are you looking for?' the driver asked.

'Did you see where that man went?'

'Which man?'

'You know, the guy who was standing with me when I called you.'

The auto driver shook his head and then said, 'Madam, we also drink but we don't let our minds play tricks on us.'

She was going to take offence when, suddenly, something replayed in her not-so-sober mind.

Yes, the man was not Ghosh … Shopan had said, after which he had whispered, 'His name was Shopan Sen…'

She looked back again at the station entrance that was shrinking with distance; there was no one there, not a single soul. The silence and the freezing chill of terror crept back in. In the distance, she could hear the next train arriving.

15 January 2001

'Come, let's go. There's nothing that we can do,' Babui pleaded as he struggled to pull Chokhu towards the shore.

Chokhu looked at Babui who was putting in more effort with every passing second. In the light of the matchstick, he could see thick dark veins that popped out from Babui's forehead and ran to the edge of his arm, which was locked with Chokhu's dark brown wrist. Chokhu turned his face and looked at the blood-red water of the Khooni Nadi, bubbles forming on the surface as if someone was fighting to surface.

'I have to go, Babui,' Chokhu said, and broke free of Babui, jumping into the water with a rod in his hand. The burning matchstick fell on the ground. A splash of reddish brown water fell on the startled Babui, who shivered with fear. It was foggy and dark again.

Two weeks ago

Chokhu wished that he had never come to that place. Just like everybody else, he regretted the decision he took. It was the thirty-first of December when Chokhu had set out from Hooghly in the heavily packed, unreserved general compartment of the train that arrived in Delhi two days later.

Everywhere, he could hear people wishing each other a happy new year. Happy or not, for him, it wouldn't change much. Of course, it was much worse in the small village in the Rajshahi district of Bangladesh, from where he—along with two dozen others (most of them youngsters of his age)—had crossed to the other side of the border. Shomim, the man who was supervising the illegal migration, had promised a bright future in the land of opportunities—India.

Shomim left them in the hands of Buron dada, who loaded them into a tempo and rode to Howrah. Little Chokhu remembered his limbs tiring out and eyes fading into a slumber before waking up to the blaring horns of the trains at Howrah. Another man took over from there and led them into the unreserved coach of a train. Chokhu shared the space with over two hundred other people for two sleepless nights.

At Delhi, the immigrants were passed to Immu, a small, lanky man of about thirty years of age.

A few hours later, Chokhu and the newly arrived immigrants were staring at the small kacha houses where they were supposed

to live for the next few years, or until they could afford to go back home.

Home—the very definition had changed for Chokhu. It was terribly cold, unlike his village. The chilling air bit into the bare skin of the young Bangladeshi boy. He looked at Immu who was well-covered with a sweater and a muffler.

'I will take you to your workplace tomorrow. Be ready by six in the morning. If you work hard, you will get a hundred rupees a day,' Immu informed in a forcefully motivating tone. Just when Chokhu had started to wonder how much it actually meant, the agent added, 'One hundred twenty Takas for one day! Could you ever imagine such money in Birshal?'

Indeed, Chokhu could never have imagined making that kind of money for a day's work back in his village. His father was struggling to make a hundred Takas a month. That said, Chokhu was hopeful of a good future. At least he still had Poddu and Babui with him. He turned to look at the entrance of the medium-sized mud hut. It did not have a door, but a blue sheet that rustled against the cold breeze. It parted as his two best friends came out of it after storing their luggage. They were going to stay in that space with fifteen other young boys from different parts of Bangladesh and some from Assam and Odisha.

Chokhu finished his morning prayer and left for the workplace at around quarter-past six along with the others. Babui, Chokhu and Poddu moved like a single unit. Immu wore a black leather jacket. He was quiet most of the time, but occasionally spoke to mention landmarks and milestones on the way to the workplace.

Not much was visible in that early morning hour, and even the sun shied away from making an appearance. The thick fog smelled like carbon. They walked past an old residential colony, followed by a deserted area covered in large trees. A terrible smell of sulphuric waste filled the nostrils of those who passed the area. Immu coughed and then covered his nose.

'That smell is coming from the canal that flows beyond these woods. You are not advised to go near it,' Immu instructed as he jogged on to the other side of the road.

'Why?' somebody asked.

'It is haunted!' Immu replied.

The very word froze the three boys on the spot. They looked towards the woods, though they could hardly see beyond the first few bushes because of the fog.

'Come on, don't stare and waste my time,' Immu called the boys and started walking towards the junction signal.

Everyone else was already gone. The boys quickly scurried towards the junction and soon they were at the location which was supposed to become a metro station within the next three years.

Two weeks passed without much change. Chokhu, Babui and Poddu were now used to the routine and Chokhu had already sent a thousand Takas home through one of the agents. It was then that he learned that he needed some more money as his father was to be taken to a hospital in town.

It was the fourteenth of January. The day's work was over for them, and the next shift's labourers were arriving. Babui was

bringing back an empty wheelbarrow from the beam to the filling area. He stopped while passing by the site supervisor's cabin. He saw Immu walking into the room, leaving the door ajar behind him. Through the narrow opening between the double doors, Babui noted that there was some kind of a transaction going on inside. The supervisor had a duffel bag and inside it, there were bundles of currency notes. Babui had no idea how much it was or why it was there in the first place. He dropped the wheelbarrow and tiptoed to the corner where Chokhu and Poddu were sharing a beedi. They turned their attention to the approaching friend.

'Guys, do you want to make quick money?' Babui said.

'I need money. But how?' Chokhu asked curiously.

'I just saw that supervisor hand over a bag full of cash to Immu. Probably the money that has been promised to the rascal for bringing us here.'

'But that is not a fair means of making money, right?' Chokhu said, as he saw Immu leave the supervisor's cabin with the alleged bag of money.

'Chokhu, my poor Chokhu. We are all being exploited here. They are all eating into the money that should rightfully be paid to us labourers.' Babui looked at both his friends and then fixed his gaze on Chokhu, 'Your father might not get the treatment he needs to survive because of the money problem.'

'Let's do it,' Chokhu said without hesitating as he threw the beedi on the ground and started off in the direction that Immu had taken minutes ago.

The three boys followed Immu who was now crossing the road

at the junction. A roll of rope dangled from Babui's shoulder, Chokhu held a medium-sized iron rod from the construction site in his right hand and a sharp razor blade was safely hidden inside Poddu's palm.

'I think now is the best time to ambush the rascal,' Babui revealed his plan. 'People don't go near that area after sunset because of that haunted canal story. So, it will be an ideal place for our work. Poddu will snatch the bag from Immu and run towards the canal, forcing Immu to follow him. We will surround Immu near the canal and tie him up. After that, we leave this place forever!'

'Something doesn't feel right,' Chokhu murmured. 'Should we really go to that canal?'

'It is just a story circulated by superstitious people. There is nothing haunting about the canal. Probably some drunk idiot slipped and drowned in it, which paved the way for the story,' Poddu said, impatient.

'But—'

'We are not doing this for us alone. Just think of your father for once. I saw it, there was enough money for all that and more inside the bag,' Babui said.

Chokhu's eye filled and he fell silent for the next few seconds.

'Are we ready?' Babui asked.

Poddu nodded, determined, while Chokhu reluctantly looked at Babui.

'Great, let's go!' Babui said, and crossed the road, followed by Poddu and Chokhu.

Immu walked a few more steps and entered the area that reeked of sulphur. He clutched the bag with his left hand as he used the other to cover his nose.

That was the signal. Babui pushed Poddu slightly. Poddu stalked closer to Immu and swung his blade against the strap of the bag. The bag fell free and Poddu was fast enough to grab it before sprinting into the woods. Immu turned and ran after the thief whose face he hadn't managed to see. The other two boys were about a hundred feet away, preparing to go after Immu in order to ambush him in the woods.

The dwindling light of the evening suddenly faded to a pitch black as soon as Immu entered the woods. The fog had gotten thicker and the odour was making the middle-aged man cough more and more. He could not see the thief anymore, nor could he hear the sounds of the road. There were no more blaring horns or

tinkling bells of cycle-rickshaws. It was eerily silent, except for the sound of water flowing at some distance—the canal the locals called Khooni Nadi or the bloody river.

'Whoever it is, come out. No one can escape the ghost that haunts the canal. I am warning you,' Immu said, sounding afraid. 'Better give me the bag before it is too late.'

Immu knew that there was no other way out of that place except for the path they came through. He decided to go outside and wait near the road, so that the moment the thief came running out, he could catch him. But the moment he turned, he was caught by two pairs of hands and beaten up mercilessly in the dark.

The sound of water splashing startled them all. Chokhu ran towards the sound. He searched his pocket and pulled out a matchbox. He lit one matchstick and its yellow light illuminated the fog around him. And in that brief moment, he saw the right hand of his beloved friend go down in the thick, viscous water of the canal.

Chokhu inched towards the edge of the water but someone grabbed his hand from behind. It was Babui.

'I have got the bag and tied up that rascal Immu. Let's escape before he gets out of it,' Babui said, panting.

'I can't let Poddu drown,' Chokhu said.

'There's nothing we can do. Come, let's leave this place,' Babui pleaded as he struggled to pull Chokhu towards him.

'I have to go, Babui,' Chokhu said, wriggling out of Babui's clutches before jumping into the water with the rod in his hand.

Chokhu felt the water coming at him, but he went deeper with all the strength in his arms until his hand touched something that felt like a human hand. Suddenly it moved, and clutched Chokhu's hand. It was his friend, Poddu's hand. Chokhu felt relieved and he started pulling his friend up. Suddenly Chokhu felt something grab him from behind. It was an unusual feeling and in the darkness, he could only sense it. He focused on pulling out his friend from the bottom. However, by then the thing had locked on to Chokhu's back. He could feel a weird suction over his backbone. Chokhu turned in pain, and saw a pair of glowing red eyes. Horrified, Chokhu let go of his friend's hand. The eyes came closer and he could feel slimy tentacles covering him. With all his might, he pushed the iron rod into the left eye of the creature. The tentacles released him and Chokhu went down and caught hold of Poddu's hand and started swimming upwards.

Moments later, Poddu and Chokhu surfaced and swam towards

the shore where they could see the silhouette of Babui holding a lit matchstick. Babui held out his hand to Poddu. He was short of breath when he climbed on to the shore, more so because of the smell coming from his body.

'Where is Chokhu?' Babui asked Poddu.

'I'm here,' Chokhu replied as he climbed to the shore. Strangely, he was not wet, unlike his friend Poddu.

'Poddu, where is Chokhu?' Babui asked again, but this time a little more worried.

Chokhu was about to answer when Poddu burst out crying.

'Dada, there was a monster … I saw it … it had huge red eyes.' Poddu shivered as he spoke. 'I do not know how I escaped it, but I felt like someone took my hand and pulled me up.'

'What do you mean by someone? It was me, gaddha!' Chokhu said, irritated. However, Babui and Poddu continued to ignore Chokhu as if he did not exist.

'I had told him not to jump into the haunted canal. Let's go before that Immu catches us,' Babui said and started walking away from the water.

'Guys, I'm right here! I know it's dark, but why can't you hear me?' Chokhu cried in confusion. Once again, he remained unheard.

'May his soul rest in peace,' Poddu prayed as he walked away with Babui.

That was when it struck Chokhu. It was time for Chokhu to rest in peace, but little did he know that when the monstrous creature had clutched on to his back, it had literally sucked out his soul. The boy had died that very moment, crumbling under the pressure of the closing tentacles. But it was his spirit that struggled to save his friend from dying, without even realizing that he had lost his own life in the battle. A battle with an unseen monster. And now, his soul stood staring into the darkness. He regretted coming to this land—one he was destined to haunt.

Death—it instils in us a sense of being. In some, it strikes fear while, to others, it brings melancholy. None can ever hope to escape it. Buddhists call it one of the four universal truths and the Zoroastrians have their own beliefs about the unavoidable.

Ziya did not know anything about the customs of her forefathers. She was raised in the United States, by a Catholic mother and in a very Catholic environment. It was only after she fell in love with a man from Mumbai, named Arush Jain, that she moved back to the city of her predecessors. The engagement took place at the Taj and they were soon living together in her fiancé's apartment in Grand Towers.

The night she arrived at the apartment on the twelfth floor, she felt a strange sensation—and it was not a positive one. She later dismissed it as the kind of feeling one gets when they move from one country to another. She could not sleep that night and felt as if she was being watched by an unknown presence. Two days passed and on the third morning, after Arush left for work, she started receiving calls on the landline. When she answered them, there would be no one on the other side. She had similar experiences with the front door as well. But what creeped the hell out of her was when the unsuspecting Ziya heard knocking on the glass door that led to the balcony. When she turned around, she noticed a woman jumping off the balcony. She ran downstairs in fear. However, there was no one on the ground, it was probably

her imagination, or so she told herself. Later, she was told by a neighbour that the place was known for not one or two, but over a dozen suicides ever since it was constructed in 1975.

That evening, when Arush came home, she was ready with a number of questions and she did not even wait for him to change.

'Arush, did you know who lived here before us?' she asked him.

'I'm not sure. My parents bought it from someone. The house, as far as I know, was already vacant and the offer came through a broker,' he replied, while changing into lounge wear.

'What was the name of the broker?'

'I don't think he's alive.'

'Can't you check the name of the owners in the agreement? It must be with you or your parents?'

'Why do you want to know all this?'

'I feel like this house is…' she looked around, as if to check whether someone else was present, and then whispered, 'haunted!'

'What?' her fiancé chuckled, 'Are you out of your mind?'

'Look, ever since I got here I have started hearing things around the house. The other day, I saw a woman jump off that balcony.'

'Who?'

'I did not see the face, just the back. I think it must be the apparition of the previous owner. But when I went down, there was nobody.'

'So, you know that it was your imagination.'

'I am not denying that, Arush. But I also know that I am not paranoid or crazy. It started after I entered this house. That is my worry,' she stated clearly.

'Baby, I will see what I can find. Okay?'

She nodded reluctantly and Arush decided to take her out to dinner.

Later that night, when Arush and Ziya were fast asleep, something woke the young woman. Perhaps it was a nightmare. She was sweating and her heart was racing. It was pitch black all around. She tried to switch on the lights but realized that the electricity was out. The window was open and the curtains waved in the the wind. She closed the window and turned back to the bed when she noted that the bedroom door was ajar. She remembered closing it before she went to sleep. Perhaps her husband had left it open. She was about to close it when she saw, through the gap, a scene that froze her to the spot. It was a

woman wearing a blue nightdress walking towards the balcony. Scared stiff, she watched the woman jump off the balcony. Only this time, it was a night of heavy rain and wind. She rushed back to bed, but could not sleep.

The following morning, she checked with one of the security guards if they knew anything about the previous owners of the house.

'I am not sure, memsahib, but you should ask Mr Kachone. He has been living in this building ever since it was built. He must know,' the security guard informed her.

Mr Milind Kachone was a Maharashtrian man in his early sixties. He was retired and read a lot of Marathi literature, and had perfectly combed salt-and-pepper hair. He dipped an arrowroot biscuit in his cup of lukewarm tea and said, 'Beta, this building is known for all these bad happenings. As far as I remember, your apartment was previously occupied by a woman.' He stopped to ponder and then continued, 'A Parsi woman called Parizaad. I think she was a widow, for I never saw her husband.'

'What happened to her?' Ziya asked.

'I do not know. She was an activist and spent every last paisa to protest against the construction mafia and government nexus.'

'So, she did not commit suicide here?'

'No. She vacated and months later, your fiancé's family moved in.'

'Do you know where she relocated to?'

'I'm sorry. But perhaps you can check in the public library where you might find a piece or two about the environmental activist Parizaad Irani.'

Later in the evening, she told her fiancé about this new finding. He denied having known anyone by that name and told her that the house was bought over from a broker called Chintan Das. After hours of pondering, she found herself dozing off. When she opened her eyes, she found herself standing in front of an old gate, unlocked. On the left side, there was a board that read Doongerwadi. She pushed open the gate and stepped on a rocky surface, with tall trees on either side. The sky was dark and everything around her bathed in a blue glow. There was a heavy silence around her, and she started walking on a path that led her to a large tower. It was old and she heard the sound of a vulture swooping down from behind, hitting her with its talons. She fell down on her face and suddenly woke up. It was a dream.

She found herself in bed and, yet again, it was a night without

electricity and the curtains were dancing in the wind. She turned towards the open door, just like the previous night. Scared, Ziya tiptoed towards the door and into the hall, where she saw the woman in blue walk to the balcony. Ziya walked into the balcony and stood next to the ghost-woman.

This time, the apparition turned to face Ziya. The very sight of her face shocked Ziya and she hit the ground, unconscious. The next morning, she was found there by Arush. He started thinking about taking Ziya out on a vacation over the weekend.

That afternoon, Ziya first went to the public library. She could not gather much information on the environmentalist, but she got something else. She remembered reading the board in her dream and looked for material on it. The place was called Doongerwadi, and it was a dakhma—the Parsi tower of silence. It was a place where the dead were laid to rest, offered back to nature through the vultures and natural decay. More intriguing was the fact that the centuries-old dakhma was hardly five minutes from her apartment—on the other side of Malabar Hills.

When she arrived at the entrance gate, she was startled at how easily she recognized it from her dream. It was the same, except the gate had a big iron lock on it. It was eerily silent. The wall was tall and she could only see the tiled roofs of some houses inside. She knocked on the gate and soon heard someone approaching.

'What do you want?' asked a man dressed in white. His baritone was unsettling.

'I … I want to come inside,' Ziya answered.

'You cannot come inside. This is a restricted area for the Parsi community.'

'But … but I am Parsi. My father was half-Parsi.'

'It doesn't matter. You still need to come with a signed letter of consent.'

'Okay … but can you tell me if you know something about Parizaad Irani?' she asked.

There was a momentary silence, as if the man on the other side of the gate was taken aback by the name. He came forward and stood right in front of Ziya, with the gate separating them. He said, 'Why do you want to know about that woman?'

'So, you know her!'

'She was a poor, old, crazy soul who would spend her days educating people on how the municipality was responsible for the dwindling number of vultures.'

'Yes, I heard that.'

‘She blamed the municipality for her husband’s wandering spirit,’ the man revealed.

‘What? How does that have any connection with this?’

‘You said you were half-Parsi or something like that. Can’t you guess the connection?’

She stood there helpless. She was never raised as a Parsi. Poor Ziya wanted to connect the dots but did not realize that the man, the Khandia, was referring to the declining vulture population, and that those birds were responsible for helping the dead cross over and find peace. Ziya knew nothing about dokhmenashini or the safe passage to heaven and how important vultures were to the process.

It hadn’t occurred to Ziya that many spirits were trapped, their bodies left unconsumed. Parizaad directly linked the crisis to the aggressive construction work.

Finally, after some research on her phone, Ziya realized what Parizaad had fought for and why. She then got a message from her fiancé informing her that he had to return to the office for a meeting, but that he had a surprise for her at home.

When she entered her bedroom she noticed a gift box on the bed. A note on the present read: Hope to see you in this tonight! She unwrapped the gift and found glittering nightwear. It was blue.

Back in the office, Arush wrapped up his meeting and booked a cab home when he got a call from Celina, Ziya’s mother.

‘How is it going?’ his future mother-in-law asked.

‘All well, Celina. I’m taking Ziya to Khandala for the weekend,’ he said, impatiently. He was looking forward to a romantic evening with Ziya and wanted to hurry home.

‘I’m glad everything is alright.’ The woman paused and then spoke in a hushed tone, ‘I was a little worried, you know.’

‘About what?’

‘Well, the last time she was there she witnessed something so traumatic that it took a lot of therapy and hypnosis to rid her of the horror. And we had promised ourselves to never bring her back to Mumbai, or even India, for that reason.’

‘I don’t understand. Ziya never told me anything about it,’ Arush said, suddenly worried.

‘She won’t remember now. She was just six when we came to visit India. We visited one of my father’s sisters in the old town. She was an activist; frail and about seventy when we saw her. The

woman was out of her mind and jumped off the balcony right in front of my six-year-old Ziya. Poor child. But I'm glad that Ziya is alright now. And we have you to thank for this. Bless you!' she said.

'Thank you, Celina. I … I better go now. My cab is here,' Arush said before disconnecting.

A strange feeling churned his gut and made him more anxious as he got into the cab. He had been hearing all sorts of crazy things from his fiancé over the last two weeks that had made him worry for her mental health. The phone call from Celina confirmed his fears. He rushed out of the cab, throwing two five-hundred rupee notes at the driver as he rushed to his apartment. That was when he heard the loud thud behind him. He turned around and noticed something on the ground. Even the cab driver stepped out as he realized what it was—a woman in a blue nightdress.

1992

Ganesh Rao had an appetite for bajji. He waited till he finished the night's play at the university theatre. It was for this night that they had been practicing for almost a quarter of the year. Ganesh planned to rush downhill to the junction where Basavaiyya sold hot and delicious bajjis for passengers who disembarked at the inter-state bus stop.

Unfortunately for the young actor, their performance was delayed and it was around half-past eleven at night when they were finally done. Ganesh and Mahesh were standing in their getups backstage with Shivu, a batchmate and fellow actor. While most of the people backstage were still in costume, there was a swarm of students who were dressed in white uniforms—the organizing committee members.

'I'm totally pissed off at the organizing committee. I was hoping the play would get over by nine. Look at the time now!' Shivu complained, showing the watch tightly wound over his thick wrist.

'Of course you're upset—your wife must be waiting for you at home,' Mahesh teased Shivu. 'Did you have plans?'

'It's her birthday and I had promised to be there on time tonight.' He looked at one of the members from the organizing committee and then went on, 'They would not even let me use the telephone in the chancellor's room to call and inform her about the delay.'

'What's the big deal? She's not living alone. Your entire extended family lives with you in the halli,' Ganesh said.

'Get married, and then maybe you will understand.'

'Excuse me?' a female committee member called Shivu from behind.

Shivu turned and so did Ganesh and Mahesh. They were awestruck by the girl's raw beauty. She had dark and flawless skin and wore a white saree, just like all the girls in the festival's management committee. But it was the girl standing next to her who had grabbed Ganesh's attention. She was a complete contrast: tall, slim, fair as milk and blushing like a rose in winter. Her eyebrows drew a sharp curve above her piercing eyes. For a moment, Ganesh and Mahesh could not see beyond her. Shivu, though, did not seem to be affected by the presence of the second girl at all. In fact, he did not even look at her. He was focused on contacting his wife.

'Please come with me to the chancellor's room,' the first girl requested in a very formal tone.

'For the telephone call?' Shivu asked eagerly.

'Yes,' she said, and then walked away.

Shivu said goodbye and left. The second girl also followed them. She turned back once and looked at Ganesh before walking into the crowd.

Ganesh had a smile on his face when he turned towards Mahesh.

'She was just gorgeous,' he remarked, as if coming out of a trance.

'Must be one of those girls from South Canara,' Mahesh guessed.

'Anyway, let's go now.'

'Go where? To South Canara?'

'No, to Basavaiyya's place for bajji,' Ganesh reminded his close friend.

'I don't have the energy to go downhill. Besides, look at the time, he must have closed.'

'No, he is open till two in the morning.'

'I'm exhausted and in no mood to eat. Just a peg down my

throat and then I'm off to sleep in the room they gave us.'

'Fine! I'll go on my own,' said Ganesh and he left the building.

The air outside the building was completely different. It was cold, dry and fresh. There was hardly anyone around and the odour of sweat had been replaced by the pleasant smell of mallige —a night-blooming flower found in that region. Ganesh reached out to pluck one of the flowers.

'No, don't do that!' warned a voice from behind him. It had a piercing property which was attractive as well as assertive. It continued, 'These little beauties have a very short-lived life of one night. Do not deprive them of that.'

Ganesh stopped and turned. His eyes fell upon the most alluring sight of the evening—it was the fair girl he had met earlier.

'What are you doing here?' he asked.

The girl adjusted the fall of her saree as if preparing to ensnare the lone man.

'I want to go home. It's on the way downhill. I saw you walking that way so I thought you could give me company. It's too late to go alone, you know.' She paused to look into Ganesh's eyes with a gleam in hers. She asked, 'Are you going downhill?'

For a moment, Ganesh was overwhelmed by the energy in those captivating eyes. He shook his head to snap out of it.

'Yes! I was going downhill to the bus stop.' He tried his best not to stare too long into her eyes.

'Do you mind if I come along? Like I said, my house is on the

way.'

'Sure, I will enjoy you—er, I mean, your company.'

They started walking down the slope. She did not talk about anything, and Ganesh played the silent companion. He tried not to look at her because every time he did, his hormones went wild. Something about her was so hypnotic that it turned him on—he wondered if it was because of those sharp black eyes on milky white skin or the hip that curved like the contours of a Banganapalli mango. He looked away from her and fixed his eyes on the path downhill. The mild mist seemed to thicken and the chill drove its claws into him.

'It's cold out here. You should have worn something warmer,' the woman said, looking at Ganesh's half-sleeved shirt.

'I've never felt this cold before.'

'Well, I know a good herbal drink that will give you the strength to withstand this cold. I will make it for you if you come over to my house,' the woman in the white sari offered.

'At this hour? Won't your parents freak out?' a startled Ganesh asked.

'Don't worry about that. Men come to my place at all odd hours. You are not the first.' She winked, reminding him of a twinkling star.

I am not the first one … What could she mean by that? His mind went over every possible explanation but he wanted to dismiss the obvious. He had a sudden urge to get closer to the woman, to place his hands on her round hips.

After all, it was a beautiful night—a perfectly romantic setting.

'You are really trying hard. Aren't you?' she asked, stopping at a T-junction in the path.

Ganesh had no intention of saying no, but he restrained himself.

The woman pointed towards the pocket road on the left. 'My house is there. Come.' She led him by the hand.

The moment her warm palm made contact with his, Ganesh could not feel anything else. He was almost in a trance.

He spotted what looked like an old house in the milky mist of the mountain. As they got closer, the fog faded and the wooden house was now standing right in front of the man. She stepped into the porch and looked under the old, dusty doormat. She lifted it to retrieve her key and unlocked the door.

'Everyone must be asleep, so be quiet,' she warned him.

'I can wait outside…' Ganesh said half-heartedly.

'Please, my dear. Don't be shy.' A wicked smile spread on her face.

She kneeled down and placed the key back under the mat. Even the breeze could not seem to resist blowing her pallu off her shoulder. As it dropped on the floor, Ganesh got a glimpse of the woman's deep cleavage. She looked at the man mischievously, as if inviting him with her eyes, and then draped it over her shoulder. She went inside. Ganesh followed.

Perhaps this will be the night of my life! He thought excitedly.

The woman lit a lantern and brought it to the living room where Ganesh was seated on a wooden chair. She placed it on the centre table, which looked even older than the house. Everything was made of wood: from the walls to the floor.

She went back into the kitchen and he could hear the mild sounds of vessels clinking. He looked around while sitting. There was a portrait of the beautiful woman wearing nothing but a transparent red scarf, which perfectly covered her shapely breasts. The scarf went on to drape itself around the woman's lower body, revealing everything below the thighs.

Thunder roared outside, but it was the thunder inside his mind that Ganesh was trying to control. He could hear the woman humming a folk song, and she did it in the sultriest tone ever. Ganesh looked away from the portrait to curb his lust—that was when his eyes fell on what looked like a man's dhoti. But there was something under the dhoti which was not clearly visible in the distance and in that dim light. He got up and walked towards it.

A flash of lightning illuminated the garment long enough for him to see the blood on it.

He lifted the dhoti and something fell on the floor. The light of the lantern revealed a broken finger. He dropped the finger in horror. There was a trail of blood leading to one of the closed rooms. He tiptoed with the lantern and then opened the door without making a sound. At first, he saw nothing. He took one step inside when he felt something under his foot. He lifted his foot and looked down—it was the thigh of a man, just one bloody thigh ripped from the body. And then there was another part nearby, and some more. It was not a bedroom, but a museum of amputated male body parts. He turned to run, but at the door, he saw something inhuman. He recognized the white saree, but the body inside was pure evil: grey hair on every inch of exposed skin, long and loose white hair, almost white eyes with black spots for pupils, and the fangs of a serpent.

Ganesh Rao chanted the mahamrityunjaya mantra that his grandfather had taught him, and used all his might to push the creature away before running out of the house. Cold drops of rain fell on him as he sprinted downhill. He knew the monster was after him. He slipped and fell, tumbled down the slope until his head hit a boulder. He knew it was over. His lust for bajji was the root cause of everything. He should have stayed back with Mahesh.

Now, he could not even move his body. He was paralyzed and soon, everything went black.

When Ganesh opened his eyes, he found himself in the ward of a general hospital in the Mandya district. Ganesh Rao had been unconscious for over a week. The duty nurse informed the doctor about the development and soon Mahesh, Shivu and other people came to visit their friend.

'What happened?' Ganesh asked.

'We found you lying unconscious on the hill road while going home after the play,' Mahesh revealed.

'The university hired a tempo traveller for our troop that night itself. You should have stayed with us,' Shivu said as he placed his bulky right hand on Ganesh's cold left hand.

'But what about that girl?' Ganesh asked.

'Which girl?'

'The one with the girl who took Shivu to the chancellor's room,' Ganesh clarified.

'That girl? What did she do?' Mahesh asked.

‘Wait … which girl? There was only one girl from the organizing committee who came to call me!’ Shivu stated.

‘No, there was another one. She was taller,’ said Mahesh.

‘Yes, yes…’ added Ganesh, shaking his head.

‘Oh my God. You guys saw her … because she only appears to unmarried men. She lures them with her beauty and then preys on their lust.’ Shivu paused to look at the expressions on the faces of the two bachelors and then concluded: ‘You just escaped the clutches of a Mohini Pisasu.’

2006

It all began on a moonless night when sixteen-year-old Tabassum Parwin went to meet her lover behind the women's hostel. It had never occurred to her that the following morning she would be arrested as a prime suspect in the murder of Shah Nawaz, her boyfriend who studied in a neighbouring college. She claimed to not remember anything—until Saira Siddique, another resident of the hostel, testified to witnessing the young couple making love in the empty motor shed behind the building.

Saira had kept quiet for almost a week but eventually, she revealed everything to the police on the condition that she be taken away from the hostel—the reason for which she never gave, though it was clear something was disturbing her. Soon after, Tabassum was found dead in her room while Saira disappeared from the hostel. The police got involved and now suspected Saira of foul play. The hostel warden was asked to keep a watch on the nocturnal activities of the students while the principal tried his best to keep the media away from the matter.

The warden was Stella Mary George, a Malayalee Catholic from Kottayam. She decided to take a stroll through the hostel after dinner, making sure that everything was alright. The residents

were instructed to lock all rooms from inside and not to step out after 9 p.m.

Stella Mary, with her long strides, covered the entire ground and first floor in ten minutes. Both Tabassum and Saira were residents of the second floor and the very memory of the fact gave the pale-skinned woman chills. She started on the pathway and passed by each of the doors, until the second last on the left: that had been the room of the two girls. One died and the other ran away under mysterious circumstances. Stella Mary felt a viscous resistance in the air when she arrived in front of their room. She found it difficult to move ahead, as if something was holding her from behind. She looked to the left, at the door. It sounded like something was moving inside the room. Her eyes widened at the sight of a green light glowing through the gap under the door. Mary grabbed the steel crucifix on her necklace and with the other hand, she turned the door's metallic knob.

The door opened and she cast a brief look inside. There was nothing there. It was dark and silent as death. Her heartbeat slowed with relief.

She slowly closed the door, releasing the crucifix. It was at that moment that she turned around and saw the most shocking sight of her life: the dead Tabassum, skin paled to white and eyes blackened by lifelessness. The green smoke rose from around the body. The dead girl pointed her hand to the left, to a window. Stella Mary did not have to look beyond the walls to know what the dead girl's spirit was pointing at. The warden sprinted down the stairs and arrived in front of the motor shed, the place where Shah Nawaz was found dead. When Stella opened the door, she knew that she had to call the police for she had found Saira Siddique—dead.

The police did not believe Stella Mary's story and someone actually advised her to take a break from work as the recent deaths had taken their toll on the warden's sanity. Over the next few days, more residents saw the ghost and many girls left the hostel. The word spread and soon became national news. At the advice of a peon, the principal summoned Maulana Nizamuddin from Baghelghat. The madrassa teacher was quite well known in that part of the country for driving away evil spirits.

When the five-foot tall, flat-shouldered man of around fifty years of age arrived at the hostel, he was welcomed by a girl jumping from the window in her room.

'This is not the work of an ordinary human spirit. It is the work of a djinn,' the Maulana claimed.

‘Djinn?’ the principal asked.

‘Djinns are beings who cannot be detected by humankind. They exist everywhere but we cannot perceive them. It comes from the Arabic word jann which simply means ‘hidden’. They can only be detected with a sixth sense.’

‘What do we do now?’

‘You must find out who the original owner of this land was. Do it before the next new moon,’ the Maulana instructed the principal. ‘If we do not stop the djinn, he will endanger the life of every girl in this town.’

The land belonged to a Muslim family who had fled the place almost half a century ago. Most of them were settled in Patna and a few of them outside Bihar. No one dared to come back to their native place because of the evil that was trapped there. It was in 1956 when they had come to the peak of luxury—Afzal Sheikh’s family was flourishing in every sphere of life. However, his aunt was jealous of his success and invoked a djinn using black magic. It wreaked chaos in the lives of Afzal and his loved ones. He lost his wife, his daughter and daughter-in-law in succession, but not before they were possessed by the djinn. His house was set on fire by the daughter before she killed herself, while his grandchild was thrown from the terrace by his wife. The djinn worked through women and would eventually drain their life. Afzal asked his remaining children and grandchildren to go as far away from the place as possible. With the help of a Maulvi, Afzal trapped the djinn and buried it deep in the compound. He sealed it with the holy name of Allah. Afzal spent the rest of his life standing guard,

protecting the sanctity of the place—the only thing that kept the djinn trapped.

Decades passed and eventually, the man died of old age. His grandson sold off the property to the NGO that started a school for girls there. The place was no longer holy after that night in 2005, when young Shah Nawaz and Tabassum had sexual intercourse inside the motor shed. The djinn escaped, possessed the girl and made her kill the boy. That was just the beginning.

On the next new moon night, Maulana Nizamuddin along with his clergy assistants prepared the grounds for fixing the djinn. All the girls were asked to vacate the place in the afternoon. The sky above the hostel grew dark and stormy. It wasn't easy, but the Maulana managed to trap the djinn. At the end of the night, he was able to silence the storm that was raging above. The principal was asked to build a concrete structure around the shed to prevent anyone else from going near the place.

After the Maulana finished his prayers at his quarters in Baghelghat, he heard a noise in his room. When he arrived in the room he was shocked to see the apparitions of Tabassum, and Saira, standing in the centre of the room and staring vengefully through blackened eyes. The Maulana's eyes burned like embers in a flame, and then the girls lifted their right hands and pointed in the direction of the Maulana. He could sense it, but did not have the courage to turn around. A green smoke spread through his peripheral vision…

The djinn was there.

The Pretha of Bengaluru

The legend of the pretha became an inspiration for many tales and films, one of which became a blockbuster in Hindi.

NH4, 1995

Rajshekhar Gowda drove his Tata Sierra smooth and fast over the empty stretch. The area was ten times more beautiful than it would be twenty years down the line, with its plush green lawns and privately owned vineyards on either side of the highway.

He liked driving on that road in the evening, but his wife, Bindu, didn't enjoy long rides. She looked outside the window with her head resting on the seat. She was not happy anymore, and Rajshekhar knew it well. Their marriage was failing. The love that once bonded the couple had faded away like the sun in the evening sky. He wished he could undo all the things that had gone wrong over the last ten years, but before he could finish that thought the car stopped.

'What happened?' Bindu asked, suddenly snapping out of her

reverie.

'Diesel is over!' Rajshekhar replied.

'Oh God! Can't you be careful? We passed by three petrol pumps.'

'I didn't realize we were running out.'

'Like so many things you didn't realize about being married,' she said.

Rajshekhar ignored her and got out of the car. He opened the trunk, looking for the soda bottle that he used to store his reserve diesel. It was empty as well.

He closed the trunk and looked around before walking down a narrow dirt road, hoping it would lead him to a village. The little board with the name of the village had something else painted over it in red. They were disjointed Kannada alphabets: Baa, L, Naa. He could not comprehend the meaning but started walking further. Soon, he felt like someone was walking behind him, following him silently. He stopped to turn around but there was no one. He walked on along a narrow drain. Mori—that was what the locals called the dark drain water that flowed through those channels, often spilling out onto the road during the monsoons. The smell of mori made Rajshekhar nauseous.

Finally he spotted one of the first houses, and it was locked from inside. Then he noticed something written on the door in red paint: Naale Baa.

Naale baa meant 'come tomorrow' in Kannada and Rajshekhar scratched his head wondering if it was a message directed at him. If yes, how did the house owners know about his arrival? He decided to move to the next house. Once again, he saw the same message.

The message was scrawled over the door of every house in that small village. Just when he was about to turn back, he saw a man writing the message on one of the doors hurriedly. He was finishing the last syllable when Rajshekhar approached him.

'Sir,' Rajshekhar said.

'What do you want? Why are you here?' the man asked anxiously.

'My car just ran out of fuel. I just…'

'Oh, okay. But you should not have come here alone.'

'This is strange. It's only seven in the evening and the street is deserted,' Rajshekhar stated.

'Where is your car?' the man with the paint brush asked without paying any heed to Raj's observation.

'It's on the highway. My wife is in it, waiting for me to come back. Do you happen to have any diesel?'

The man thought for a moment. He quickly touched up the message written on the door with the paintbrush and said, 'Well, I think there should be some diesel in the flour mill, they need it for the big machine they have there. You should go there and ask Viswaiyya.'

'How do I get to the mill?'

'Just walk straight, it's hardly a hundred yards from here,' he said and then murmured something like, 'but I doubt you will make it there alive.'

'What? Did you say something?' Rajshekhar asked.

'No. Now leave. I cannot keep the door open any longer. Off you go!' the man said and banged the door shut.

Rajshekhar started towards the flour mill. The cold, dry air did not feel soothing anymore and he wished he had worn a sweater. The sound of his feet on the untarred road echoed in his ears as he passed by more closed houses. All the while he felt like someone was following him. He walked until he saw a board that read 'Viswa Flour Mill' in Kannada. The mill's door was also closed from inside. He knocked on it a few times and then more rapidly.

'Naale Baa…' somebody pleaded from inside.

Rajshekhar knocked on the door, 'Open the door!'

'Please, amma, naale baa … Come tomorrow!' the voice cried.

'I can't come tomorrow. I need your help now. Please open the door, Viswaiyya!'

There was some commotion inside. It sounded like utensils were clanging, falling. And then the door opened, first a long knife was pushed out and swiped down the length of the door. Then the door opened and a timid red face revealed itself behind the knife.

'It's not her!' he said with a sigh of relief.

'Her?' Raj asked.

'What do you want at this hour?'

'Are you Viswaiyya?'

'I might be, why?'

'My car is on the highway. It ran out of fuel.'

'So?'

'I was told that you might have some diesel.'

'No, I don't have any,' Viswaiyya said heartlessly and then closed the door.

'I'm willing to pay everything I have. Just give me some diesel, okay.'

'How much?' the voice asked.

'Five hundred and fifty in cash!' Raj offered as he counted the notes that he kept in his shirt's pocket.

The door opened.

'Come in, and lock the door behind you,' Viswaiyya commanded and started walking into the next room.

It was very dark inside the mill, and there were only two sources of light inside: one was the lamp lit in front of the large idol of the Goddess Durga, and the other was a kerosene lantern hanging by the hearth. The red-skinned man picked up the lantern and the two men took the narrow hallway to the grinding chamber.

'You seem to be a very brave man!' Viswaiyya said.

'Why do you say so?'

'No man dares walk alone around this village after sunset.'

'Why?'

Viswaiyya stopped and brought the lantern close to his face. He looked at Raj with horror-stricken eyes, 'Because of the pretha who haunts this place!'

'P … Pretha?' Raj stammered.

'Yes, the pretha. She is seeking revenge.'

'Revenge for?'

'A hundred years ago, a nomad wandered around the country with her tribe of sisters. Some say that she had come from the sands of Rajasthan, while others say that she came from the land of Bengal. She met young Jagan and immediately fell in love with him. Her sisters had warned her not to fall in love with a man, but then she broke her vow and had to spend her remaining life with the man she loved. Jagan loved her too, but he did not know that she was a nomad. When their love was exposed, the villagers killed the woman and her lover, cut them into little pieces and fed them to dogs. The woman's spirit still roams this village, looking for Jagan in every house. When she doesn't find him, she gets angry and thus kidnaps one male from the house and kills him to exact her revenge.'

'So, this pretha … will she stop her killing once she finds Jagan?' Raj inquired.

'Yes, but that is an impossibility.'

'Indeed. Is that why you people write Naale Baa on your doors?'

'Yes. The pretha doesn't enter houses where she is asked to come the next day.'

'And what do you do the next day?'

'We write Naale Ba again.'

Viswaiyya collected some diesel in a cup from the grinding machine's tank and poured it into a small bottle. While pouring he went on to add, 'Maariya, if in case you come across this pretha, you should know that she is also a temptress. Do not look into her eyes. If you do, she will hypnotize you and take you away. Nobody knows where she takes men and what she does to them. All we know is that they never come back.'

'Is there anything that can be used to keep her away? You know, like a cross or a protective charm or something?' Rajshekhar asked as he took the diesel-filled bottle from Viswaiyya.

'She will call you by your first name in the most alluring and seductive manner. If you listen, she will appear before you. At first she appears beautiful, but soon her skin deteriorates and her eyes fade to white. Her nails grow like the blades of my new grinding machine, and then…'

'And then?'

'Well, we don't know what happens after that. And I personally do not want to know either,' Viswaiyya said.

Five minutes later, Rajshekhar was standing outside the mill with the bottle of diesel.

'I wish I could come with you, but I'm sorry,' Viswaiyya said.

'I will be okay!'

Raj turned and started walking back to the highway. Although the highway was hardly a kilometre away from there, the legend of the pretha made the distance seem endless. The sound of his feet against the ground echoed as before, and he still felt like he was being followed. Was there someone behind him, or was it his imagination? He decided not to stop and instead, walked faster towards the highway. With no light whatsoever and hardly 500 metres left, Rajshekhar tripped over a rock and fell hard on his face. Blood streamed down his forehead. And then he heard it—the sound of someone walking. It was coming from right behind him.

'Raju…' the seductive voice called out.

Rajshekhar's heart began pounding as he tried his best to get up and run.

'Raju…' this time, the voice came from his right.

'Go away, you witch!' he cried, tears spilling out of his eyes. 'I

haven't done anything to you.'

'Raju…' the woman said again.

Rajshekhar stopped. She stood right in front of him with her feet hovering above the ground. She wore an old, torn lehenga, red in colour and definitely Rajasthani. Beneath the veil over her head, he could see red lips against wheatish skin that glowed in the dusky light. Her eyes were not visible—until her veil fell back. He saw the most dreadful pair of eyes ever. Raj remembered what Viswaiyya had told him in the mill. Instead of looking away, Rajshekhar looked right into those white eyes. He was quite sure that death was upon him and in that final moment he could only think of two people: his mother and his wife. He wished he could see his wife one last time before he died, so that he could apologize for not keeping his vows. He wished he could have been a better husband, and a tear rolled down his face. It was no longer fear, only sorrow. He closed his eyes, trying to picture him and his wife together…

He felt something strike his chest, and then it happened again. Rajshekhar opened his eyes and there, right in front of him, he saw a woman pounding his chest. It was a familiar face.

'Bin … Bindu?' Rajshekhar said between breaths.

'Raju … what the hell happened?' his wife asked anxiously.

Rajshekhar slowly got up and looked around. He was on the highway near his car.

'How did I get here?' he asked.

'I don't know. I was waiting for you when I suddenly heard a thud behind the car. When I got out to check, I saw you lying unconscious, with a wounded forehead.'

'But where is she?'

'She? She who?'

'Never mind…' Raj said and got up with the help of his wife. 'I love you, dear. I'm really thankful I got this second chance to make up for my past mistakes.'

Raj held his wife in an embrace.

They got into the car and left. In his rear-view mirror, he could see the pretha standing by the road.

A Haunting in Mumbai

It was a lazy Saturday night at the Novotel, Juhu, where film director Sanjay and I were discussing our misadventures over some whiskey and spiced peanuts. He had to cancel his shoot due to unexpected rain.

'Why do you always end up writing horror stories?' he asked as he placed the now empty glass of whiskey on the table.

'Why do you always make romantic films?' I shot back.

He chuckled. 'But, dude…' He refilled his glass and continued, 'I have experienced love, lust and whatever comes with it all. So, I relive my experiences through my films. Have you ever experienced a haunting? Be practical and don't give me that crap you give your fans or the media. Man to man, creative person to creative person—be honest,' he demanded.

'You can read my stories. They're all based on real incidents.'

'You know what? I will tell you something that happened to me a few years back, when I was assisting Brijesh sir,' he said.

'Go ahead.'

'Since you are a horror writer and have been in Mumbai for quite some time, I am sure you've heard of this place in the old town. Mukesh Mills.'

'Of course.'

'It's paradise for you horror buffs.'

'I tried going there once but I was not allowed inside,' I said.

'You can't go in without a permit,' he conceded. 'It was once owned by the British but went out of business in the seventies. Later, it was renovated but a fire broke out, claiming many lives. It's believed that the people who died there still haunt the place.'

'Do you believe that?' I asked.

'Of course not. But back in 2014, I was sent there to scout for locations for Brijesh sir's film. They had sent an assistant director with me. Sonal Talwar, that was her name. I still remember her: short, sweet, curly hair and skin as fair as a peach. She was a little dim-witted and so I always had fun teasing her. She was the victim of most of our pranks.'

'Why do I feel like I've heard her name somewhere? Is she directing a film or web series at present?' I asked.

'I don't think so.' He sipped his whiskey and continued narrating his story, 'We arrived at the place at around five in the evening, and trust me the salty breeze from the sea is scintillating! The company that owns the place allowed the two of us inside after they checked our production house's details. I still remember the security guard was quite reluctant to let the girl in. I insisted on taking her with me because I did not believe in all those bullshit stories that people have made up over the years.

'I had a Canon DSLR. Brijesh Sir was very particular about wides, you see, so I had to make sure I got all the wide shots properly. The light was dimming as the sun was going down for the day. As the two of us, Sonal and I, walked towards the blackened structure that once used to be the mill, I kept capturing as many pictures as I could. Sonal would pose as my subject in many of them. However, I could tell that she was getting nervous as we neared the structure. She did not want to go inside.'

Sanjay paused for a moment to fill his glass again.

'You know, you should have been there with us that evening. What a visual it was! The long corridor with high ceiling, the grey walls covered with black and dirt. Your creative juices would not stop flowing, I am sure.'

'Yes, I can imagine it now,' I said.

'So, there we were—standing in the long corridor of what was left of the haunted mill. The sound of the pigeon wings fluttering echoed over to us and I clicked pictures of everything, from the ceiling to the floor. We started moving further, checking

individual chambers. At one point I felt like playing a little prank on my nervous colleague, and the moment she went inside a chamber, I tiptoed backwards and came outside the ruined building. I had this naughty grin on my face and was controlling my laughter. I was trying to imagine the look on that girl's face when she realized that she was all alone inside the haunted building.' Sanjay chuckled as he recollected the incident.

'You have always been mean,' I said. 'Then what happened?'

'I expected either a loud scream or Sonal running out in panic.'

'But instead you heard a different, eerie sound and followed it in?' I guessed.

'How did you guess that?' Sanjay asked.

'Well, it is a classic horror trope. Go ahead.'

'Well, this is not a made-up story,' he assured me. 'Now, before I doze off, let me finish it.'

'Sure!'

'Like you mentioned, I heard the sound of something heavy dragging itself on the floor. I went in and rushed to the room where I had left Sonal. To my shock, there was no one inside. The room was deserted, just like the rest of the building. I could feel my heart sinking and when I came out, I saw the girl standing right in the middle of the long corridor, with her back towards me. She was motionless, still like a statue. Her position was so perfect that I could not stop myself from clicking a picture: the perfect wide shot with the subject right at the centre of a grungy ruin. It would be a perfect opening for a horror film. I was sure when Brijesh sir saw this picture, he would insist on using the same frame in the film. I needed a slight variant, so I called out to her, asking her to turn around. That's when I heard the same sound again, something heavy being dragged. I turned around as it was coming from behind.'

'What was it?' I asked.

'Absolutely nothing! So, I turned back to Sonal but was left stunned. Sonal was not there, and before I could even call out her name, someone grabbed my hand from behind. I must confess, I got chills. I turned and saw her: Sonal was laughing at me. Trust me, Hari, I could see a change come over her face: from nervousness to an overtly confident laughter. She told me that she had seen me tiptoe away and had done the same. She had just played the prank back on me.'

'So much for your supernatural experience, Mr Director!'

'Did I ever say it was a supernatural experience? I had clearly

mentioned in the beginning that I will tell you something interesting,' Sanjay clarified.

'A perfect horror comedy!' I concluded.

Sanjay was done for the night and was putting away the bottle. He did not speak much after that. I assumed that he was already too drunk to speak. I was about to leave when he stopped me.

'Can you do me a favour?'

'Yes, sure.'

'Can you please bring me my iPad? It's over there,' he said pointing towards the centre table.

I gave him the iPad. He swiped through some of the contents and finally held out a picture in front of me. 'I keep all pictures I shoot on my device. Have done so right from the days of film cameras. Here, take a look at this picture I shot on the Canon DSLR in Mukesh Mills.'

Shocked, I could only stare. It was a RAW file and there was no questioning its authenticity. It was a genuine picture—unedited, untouched. A wide shot of the corridor with the tall ceiling, with something distorted at the dead centre: a twisted apparition. It was one of the charred ghosts of Mukesh Mills.

We lay my love and I beneath the weeping willow.
But now alone I lie and weep beside the tree.
Singing 'Oh willow waly' by the tree that weeps with me.
Singing 'Oh willow waly' till my lover return to me.
We lay my love and I beneath the weeping willow.
A broken heart have I. Oh willow I die, oh willow I die.

—'O Willow Waly' by Auric and Paul Dehn, from The Innocents (1961)

Zara loved to research the unexplained. Nothing interested her more than the cozy ghost stories of Washington Irving, Ruskin Bond and Le Fanu. She belonged to an affluent family based out of Kolkata. Her father was a leather manufacturer and her mother was a socialite. They wanted to send their daughter to one of the best schools in Bengal and got her admission into the Dow Hill School in Darjeeling. Accompanied by the enthralling beauty of the hills and the haunting hues of the Dow Hill forest, the 135-year-old British school was a retreat for the creative heart. The school closed for winter vacations every year and all the students would scurry back to their homes. However, Zara's father was away in Sri Lanka for a business meeting, and therefore, the twelve-year-old had to stay back at her accommodation for a few

days.

Zara had heard from many that the school was haunted by ghosts of children and that the spectres came out when the place was empty. Intrigued, she had gone inside the school on the first day of her vacation, unnoticed by the few remaining staff.

She walked through the old corridor and past her own class, but alas! she did not have any encounters of the paranormal kind. Disappointed, she walked out of the school through the back gate that led to the Dow Hill forest. That was when someone caught her by the arm from behind. Her heart stopped for a moment.

'What are you doing here, young lady? Aren't you supposed to be at home?' inquired a hissing voice that showed no signs of benevolence.

Zara identified the person the moment those needle-like nails plunged into the tender skin of her arm. She turned dewy-eyed and apologized, 'Sorry Mrs Longchar, I had forgotten my favorite fountain pen in class yesterday. So, I came to collect it.' Zara pulled out the Vintage Bohler Gold from her pocket. 'It was a gift from my grandfather to my father. He gave it to me on my last birthday,' she added with a smile on her innocent face. Zara had not forgotten anything at all, but the pen made for a perfect excuse.

'Well, alright, young lady. Now, go to your house. Don't roam around here.'

'Yes, Mrs Longchar,' she said.

The wicked-looking teacher had a reputation for being strict. Zara smiled and started for her house. After walking a few metres, she thought about turning around to check if the teacher was still there, but she did not have enough courage. She was more afraid of Mrs Longchar than any ghost.

Zara took the road downhill but instead of taking a right to arrive at her accommodation, she kept going straight—towards the path that led to the forest. There, fog covered her path. Washington Irving once said there was a serene and settled majesty to woodland scenery that entered the soul and delighted and elevated it with noble inclinations. However, for people of Kurseong, the forest was just a place for ghost stories. Some people believed that evil spirits lurked around, peeping from behind the walnut trees, following people and driving them crazy. Other people called that particular road 'the death road' because many people were rumored to be found dead on it.

Zara, who had a taste for all things paranormal, always wanted to go to the road in the forest, but her local guardian would never

allow her to step out of the house. It was always homestay to school and school to the homestay. Earlier that day, she had lied to her guardian about it being the last day of school.

Within the visible distance, one could see moss on old rocks and tree trunks with little drops of dew, which distracted her. In one of the tiny drops, she saw her own distorted face, innocent and cute, smiling back at her. The branches of the walnut tree behind her appeared like twisted tentacles of a monster in the dew drop. Zara stared at the beautiful image as if she was trying to capture the frame in her mind when, suddenly, something behind her appeared to move in the pearly dewdrop. She turned around and noticed an old, tattered pair of black trousers hanging from a branch of the walnut tree. She was sure that it was not there before, or maybe she had just not noticed it. The trousers did not appear too long, and must have belonged to a young boy. Suddenly, she heard light footsteps crunching over the dead leaves. The sound was coming from somewhere to her right. She turned and then looked back at the tree—the trousers were gone. She decided it was time to go home.

Zara started walking back, but the footsteps returned, getting louder. Closer. She picked up pace and eventually started running when she felt like she heard a distressed voice calling out her name.

Come with me … it seemed to say. It was nothing like a human's voice. It was deep and grating. She ran into a foggy birch forest. The moderately tall trees with slender trunks were placed as if to form a maze. The fog was so dense, Zara could not see the leaves above her head. The footsteps stopped the moment she was among the birches, and so she started slowing down for breath.

Suddenly, there was a thud above her. And another. It sounded like something was jumping from one tree to another. Zara whimpered and stood against the trunk of one of the birch trees when she felt something touch her right leg. And then the left one. Creeping up were roots from within the soil. They slithered over her, curling around her feet. She tried to lift her foot, but fell flat on her face. The sound of footsteps got louder and stopped right in front of her. The girl slowly lifted her face. The little pupils dilated when she saw a pair of feet in tattered trousers. The very same trousers that she saw hanging from a tree earlier. As her eyes scanned upwards, they revealed a dirty white shirt with a torn pocket. And then finally, right where the collar ended, there was nothing. The boy in the tattered trousers was headless.

The inner walls of Zara's lungs contracted to leave her panting

for breath between sobs.

'Please … don't do … do anything to me,' she cried.

'Is it you, Katherine?' a voice asked and it was young. Boyish.

'Wh … What?' Zara asked.

'I cannot see without my head, you see,' the headless boy said. 'Is it you, Katherine?'

'No,' the girl said, getting up. 'My name is Zara.'

'Oh!' The ghost sounded a little disappointed and stepped back, 'My name is William Duphrey.'

Zara started to hope that the ghost might actually be harmless since it sounded so innocent.

'If you cannot see,' Zara said and waved her hand in front of the headless boy, 'how come you can speak to me?'

'I'm not speaking to you.'

'What?'

'It is your mind that is speaking to you,' the headless boy revealed.

'But how is that possible?'

'Anything is possible if you believe in it. I believed that someone would be able to hear my voice someday, and finally, you did. After so many years,' the boy said.

Zara's fear started fading away, and she was standing in front of the headless boy with more confidence.

'But I do not believe in ghosts.'

'You did, otherwise, why would you risk coming into the forest all alone?'

'Well, I just wanted to see if ghosts existed and how it felt to be a ghost.'

'You don't feel the cold for sure,' the boy revealed and chuckled.

'I am freezing.'

'I wish I could give you a coat.'

'That's okay. I just need to put my hands inside my jacket. Who is Katherine?'

'Katherine is my sister. We were playing hide and seek. She had told me not to hide inside the woods, but I did not listen.'

'And what happened to your head?'

'I don't know. I was hiding behind a tree when an axe was swung at me. After that, I don't know what happened. I died, I think.'

'Why did you become a ghost?' the girl asked.

'I am looking for my head. I think they won't let me in without it.'

'Who?'

'The death people.'

'The death people?'

'Yes, they come and take you to the afterlife, you know.'

'So, you are looking for your head?'

'Yes.'

'Don't you think your head would have fallen near the rest of your body?'

'Yes, I am sure it must have, but you see … I could not see after I died. I kept bumping into things, but none of them was my head. Now, I don't even know how far I have wandered from where I died.'

'That's sad. Any idea how it looked, maybe I can help you find it.'

'Really, would you help me?'

'Yes!' the girl said with a smile.

'Everyone who saw me ran away in fear. But I knew someone would help me.'

'So, tell me, what was the place like … where you died?' Zara inquired.

'I was in the forest near Katherine's school. It was full of mosses growing over walnut trees…' the boy recollected.

'Walnut trees?' Something struck Zara and she exclaimed, 'I think I know where you must have lost it.'

Zara held the headless boy's left hand and rushed out of the birch forest. Although she was not sure that she was going the right way, she followed her instincts. After spending almost an hour in the maze, jogging back and forth, the two finally made it out of the forest to where the trees were fewer and far between. Zara recognized the places she passed until she arrived in front of the walnut tree where she had seen the tattered trousers.

'Do you feel anything familiar?' she asked.

'I have been here. Many times before…' the headless boy said, as he touched the trunk of the tree.

He walked around until his hand touched something. It was an axe embedded in the trunk. There was something engraved on it in Bangla: 'P.L.'

'It's the one that killed me,' the headless boy said sadly.

'The axe is here. So, I believe the head must be around too,' Zara said and started looking around. She tried rummaging through

layers of leaves and branches and soil. Finally, she pulled out the rusted axe and used it to dig up the soil until the blade hit a solid object buried underneath. Zara dropped the axe, and pushed away the soil with her hands. Soon, she found what remained of the boy's head: a sad, brown skull. 'Did you get it?' the boy asked eagerly.

'You bet!' she said, and carefully placed it on his neck.

At first, nothing happened. She wondered if she had to say some magic words but then an aura formed around the skull. She closed her eyes against its bright light and when she opened them she saw a handsome young boy smiling at her.

'Thank you, Zara. I can't forget what you did for me,' he said. 'And if you ever see Katherine, tell her that I miss her.' The boy looked up as if he saw something closing in on him from above. 'Oh, they are here for me. I must go now. Goodbye, Zara…' His face glowed like a dream, and that was the last she saw of him before an explosion of pure white light.

When she opened her eyes, she was lying on the side of the road.

'Are you alright?' a familiar female voice asked.

It took a moment for Zara's eyes to register the face of the woman.

'Mrs Longchar … how did I end up here?' Zara asked, looking around.

'Well, I told you to go home. Then why did you come here?' the strict teacher asked. 'And what is that?' the teacher asked, looking at the axe under the girl's feet.

'You won't believe it if I told you,' Zara said.

'No … I cannot believe it,' Mrs Longchar said, reading the name engraved on the axe. 'This was my father's axe. P.L. Those are his initials. Peter Longchar. He was a woodcutter, you know, and one day while cutting down a walnut tree he saw a leopard approaching a little boy. He had called out to the boy, who was playing hide and seek at a distance, but he did not listen. So, my poor father swung the axe at the leopard who was about to pounce on the little boy. But it hit the boy instead.' The teacher's eyes welled up. 'The body was taken away by the leopard, and we could never find the head.'

Zara wished poor old William could also learn of how he died.

A woman draped in a white saree, standing on the side of a secluded road in the middle of a dark night, asking for a lift. How many times have you heard this story? If you have grown up in India, then probably every state in the country must have one road with a legend like that. The man is always hungry for the damsel's body and the woman in white is always looking for her next prey. Isn't that how these stories go?

Well, what happened to Teju Datey was similar, but not the same.

It was raining and late in the night. After shuttling passengers throughout the Western suburbs, Teju, a cab driver, received one more request while driving past Santacruz.

The rain stopped at midnight and Teju decided that it would be his last pickup for the day. Moments later, the twenty-six-year-old arrived outside the Chhatrapati Shivaji Airport, as per the location indicated by the GPS app. It was a woman about the same age as him. Her skin glowed yellow under the incandescent street light and she held a closed umbrella. She was standing next to a trolley bag placed on the wet footpath.

'Bhaiyya, 6669 is the OTP,' the woman said; her honeyed voice had a penetrating undertone. She opened the door, put her bag on the seat and then got inside. She was also carrying a small purse with her.

Teju locked in the destination and started his Vento as the

automated GPS voice began speaking the directions.

The woman made a call on her cell phone.

'Hi, this is Arushi.' She paused and then exploded on the phone, 'I landed in Mumbai at eight and have been waiting for your vehicle for three hours.' She looked at her watch. 'I have booked a cab to the shoot location. Your production guy better treat me well at the location, because I'm pissed off enough to go back.'

There seemed to be a reassuring response from the other side. Teju understood clearly that the woman was an actress on her way to Kamal Studio for a late-night shoot.

She continued venting on the phone, 'What do you mean how fast can I come? I am not the one who forgot to send a vehicle to pick up the lead actress, am I? I will ask the driver. Bye!' She disconnected the phone and stuffed it into her purse. Fuming, she sat looking out of the window, at the mild drizzle that looked like sawdust in the light of the street lamps. Even at that hour, they were stuck in traffic—which did little to improve her mood.

She checked the time on her watch and asked the driver, 'Listen, bhaiyya, is there any faster way to get to the studio?'

'Of course, but people don't like travelling on that road.'

'I don't care, just get me there on time,' she commanded.

Teju turned the car around and went towards the shortcut. They passed through a narrow lane with villas on the right side and a high wall on the left. Suddenly a gush of cold air passed through the car as it drove into a secluded road. A light fog had settled in.

'Wait … is this the…?' The woman seemed to recognize the area.

'Yes, madam. This is the dreaded Aarey road.'

'Damn it! Idiot. Why did you bring me by this road?'

'You only asked me to take the shortcut.'

'I meant a shortcut to the studio, not to hell!' Arushi slapped her forehead in frustration. She continued, 'Do you know this road is haunted?'

Teju smiled. 'Those are just stories made up by jobless people. Makes for good gossip!'

'Oh please! One of my show's assistant directors had a personal experience here last week, and I'm sure he was not lying. He is still in the hospital with broken arms and legs,' Arushi spoke in a hushed tone. She kept looking out of the window as if trying to figure out if someone was watching them.

'You are just scaring yourself by thinking about some guy's accident,' Teju dismissed her nonchalantly. He kept the car

running at a steady speed that did not cross sixty.

The woman narrated the incident as she had heard it from her colleague. 'Rajat Jain was a teetotaller and a completely sane man. He came here looking for a location to shoot a sequence for our web series. It was him and that cameraman, Ahmed. They were asked to go in the day time, but due to the spillover from the previous day's schedule they had to go late in the night.

'They had gone in Ahmed's motorbike and as they arrived at this stretch of road they felt the temperature dip, as if they had entered a refrigerator. It was around this time…' She glanced at her watch. 'And then, suddenly, it started pouring and they waited under an abandoned bus stop until the rain subsided. While they waited, they heard the weeping of a woman. It came from behind them, but when they turned there was no one. When they looked back, there she was in front of them: a woman in a red saree standing near their bike, getting drenched in the rain. She was looking at the wet ground and when they looked down they noticed that the woman's feet were pointed backwards!'

'The same old churel story!' the driver said between chuckles.

'Well, they did not believe in churels either. So, they went closer to inquire if the woman needed help. But when they got closer, the woman raised her head and revealed a face that had no eyes or nose or ears or mouth—it was simply blank. Scared, the two of them ran towards the road and got hit by a speeding truck in the rain.' Arushi paused and suddenly yelled, pointing ahead, 'There! That was the very bus stop.'

'Madam, don't shout like that out of the blue.'

'Why? Did you get scared?'

'If you yell suddenly, anyone will be startled.'

'Anyway, I hope it doesn't happen today. So, please drive fast and get us out of here,' she pleaded, joining her palms.

The drizzle picked up and it started raining heavily in a matter of minutes. However, as the rain got louder outside, an uncomfortable silence bloomed inside the cab. The woman did not speak. She had closed her eyes. She must have been praying when, suddenly, her phone rang. It startled them both, but she answered it.

'Listen…' she spoke on the phone, 'I will reach in ten minutes.' She paused for a moment to listen to the caller and then responded, 'Yes, I have my script with me. Sure. Okay, bye!'

Arushi hung up and opened the trolley bag.

'Oh no! How could I be so careless?' she exclaimed in despair.

'What happened, madam?' the driver asked.

'I forgot to bring my suitcase from the airport. Amidst all this frustration over the recklessness of the production people, I forgot to take my own stuff from the airport. Can we please go back? I kept my script and Aadhaar card in that.'

'Madam, I can take you back, but that will cost you a thousand bucks extra.'

'Whatever, dude, just take me back,' she replied.

'In advance,' the driver added sternly as he had realized that the woman was in a desperate state.

Arushi pulled out two fresh five-hundred-rupee notes and held them out to the driver. Teju collected the money without turning around and slid them into his pocket. He knew his passenger was likely cursing him from within, but he wasn't exactly fond of her either. She was rude and insisted on subjecting him to a story he did not want to listen to.

The car made a U-turn and drove back towards the airport. Soon they were back on the darkest stretch of Aarey Road. The rain battered the windshield and the wipers could do little to keep it clear.

Arushi kept looking at the time on her watch when suddenly they heard a thud from underneath the car. Teju hit the accelerator, but Arushi turned and noticed something on the wet road.

'Stop! Stop! You've hit someone,' she called out impatiently.

'What?' he asked, slamming the brake.

The car screeched to a halt roughly four hundred metres from the site of the accident.

'Look!'

Teju got out of the car and started walking in the rain towards the thing on the road. It appeared as if it was some kind of a bag or a sack. However, as he got closer, he could hear the sound a woman weeping.

The object on the road was indeed a sack, but there was something inside it. Something large. He knelt and unfastened the rope that secured the sack. His heart pounded against his ribs. He opened the mouth of the sack and felt something. It was cold and he thought he felt toes. He pulled the object out of the sack and was shocked to see a pair of feet emerge, eventually revealing the still body of a woman. She was clad in a red saree. Her dense hair had covered the face, so Teju tried to brush it aside. It was then that the driver lost his mind—the woman was faceless.

Horrified, he recoiled and found himself lying on the wet road, and from behind him a hand forced a kerchief over his nose. A pungent smell overwhelmed his senses and invaded his lungs. He struggled to look back. With his blurred vision he saw the woman holding the kerchief—it was Arushi. He lifted his head to notice two men pulling aside the sack. He felt the walls of his lungs closing in, and soon he was unconscious.

When Teju gained consciousness, he found himself lying somewhere in the outskirts of Mumbai—far away from the place where he had been drugged. The people who planned the theft took his car and everything that was inside it, including his wallet that contained the thousand rupees Arushi had given him. Of course, Arushi was one of the main conspirators.

Teju had learnt his lesson—sometimes the living were far more terrifying than the dead.

Inspired by events recounted by a friend

from Guwahati

1998

Not many people believe in ghosts these days. People believe that everything can be explained with the help of science. They try to find rational explanations for alleged hauntings.

Prayash was young and energetic back when he was an assistant director in Mumbai. He despised the government with Mr Vajpayee at the centre and strongly favored the fading Left. He naively hoped for a red revolution.

Prayash was also deeply in love with Suman, a girl he met on the sets of a film in Mumbai.

One day, he received a call from an Assamese producer based in Guwahati. The producer wanted to make a film in Assamese based on a real haunted place in the state. Of course, he wanted Prayash to write a compelling script and then direct the movie as well.

After some research, Prayash shortlisted ten haunted places in Assam and visited each of them. Finally, he settled on a house in the outskirts of Guwahati. His next step was to live there and record his experience.

The producer paid him the advance and made the necessary arrangements for him to stay in the haunted house. Apparently, the original owner of the house died under mysterious circumstances and the present owner was a distant cousin who did not care much about the house and was happy to receive rent from the producer.

The house was ideal for Prayash because, unlike his house in Mumbai—or even a hotel in Guwahati—there was no landline to disturb him. Even better, nobody ever came knocking. There were no relatives or salesmen around. He loved the privacy. However, he missed his girlfriend terribly whenever his mind wandered from the script.

The wind picked up by noon and the nights were cold. He burnt logs collected from the nearby woods to warm his body and drank a quarter of Old Monk with hot water. He soon got accustomed to the uncomfortable nights, and keeping himself warm became part of his routine.

On one exceptionally cold night he noticed the fan was running. He hadn't turned the fan on once since moving in. He dismissed it as something he might have done absent-mindedly, or while drunk, and switched it off.

The next day, while Prayash was working on the third act of his script, he heard a couple of knocks at the door. At first, he thought

it was the weed he had been smoking and ignored it. But then he heard it again, louder. He opened the door to Suman, who had been waiting to see the expression of surprise on her boyfriend's face.

'I missed you so much, I got your address from the producer. Came all the way to spend some time with you,' she said, and fell into his arms.

'Come in.'

Suman hardly ever left the comfort of her high-rise in Mulund, and it was the first time she had been inside a house that was at least 100 years old, or one that had been neglected for over fifty years. As she walked past the cobwebs and dusty furniture, she could feel an allergic reaction coming on.

'Don't you clean this place? How can you live here?' she asked.

'Trust me, this is the kind of environment I crave … it does wonders for creative work.'

'Don't you get scared?'

'Of?'

'The producer told me there was a murder in this house.'

'Yes, over six murders in 100 years.'

'And you're not scared?'

'Don't worry, all the victims were women.' Prayash chuckled.

'That is such a great thing, na?' she said sarcastically.

'Come on, spend the night. You'll realize the whole haunted thing is nothing but bullshit.'

'No way. I am not spending the night in this hellhole. I will be staying at a hotel tonight, for sure. I'll come in the morning when we can go sightseeing.'

'As you wish.'

'You don't really care, do you?' she asked, clearly disappointed.

'Of course I do…' Prayash said and held his girlfriend close, gently kissing her. A second later, she was kissing him passionately and finally, they made love on the dusty old bed. She left at seven in the evening, promising to return at ten the following morning.

That night, Prayash finished writing the sex scene. He rolled his third joint and headed outside for a walk. He knew he was high as a kite when it felt like his mind was toppling out of his head. The fresh air helped and he returned to bed, dreaming of his characters.

At around midnight, he felt a warmth taking over his body

from his feet to his neck. He woke up and was surprised to see a blanket over him, which he did not remember having on when he went to bed. He blamed it on the marijuana. He could hear his heartbeat before noticing the other sound: knocks at the front door. They got louder and more intense. He got up and opened the door.

'Suman? I thought you were staying at the hotel,' he said in a sleepy voice.

'I could not stop thinking about you, especially after the great sex we had earlier.'

Prayash just stood there and looked at her, observing the little glow in her eyes. She had it only when she was aroused.

'Are you going to come in?' he asked.

'That's what you're supposed to do,' she remarked mischievously.

What followed was intense and passionate, leaving the poor writer sated and spent. However, it only seemed to whet Suman's appetite. 'Come on, baby, one more time…' she purred. He went on until he finally collapsed.

The next morning was brighter than ever. Prayash woke up alone. Suman was nowhere to be seen.

He was tired but, at the same time, strangely refreshed. He heard sounds from the defunct kitchen and inferred that it must be his girlfriend. Five minutes later, the door to the bedroom opened and in came the ravishing Suman with a mug of piping-hot coffee.

It was so unlike her—the girl would not even make instant noodles for herself, leave alone the bed coffee for someone else.

'This coffee will give you a kick-start,' she said, handing over the mug. 'I'm going out but will be back in some time.'

Prayash sipped the hot beverage and felt like he had just tasted the best coffee ever. He finished it and went to take a shower.

While showering, he heard knocks on the outer door.

'Suman, can you please get that?' he shouted from the bathroom.

There was no response and the knocking continued.

Prayash stepped out, wrapped the towel around his waist and went to the door. When he opened it, he saw Suman standing there, annoyed.

'How long does it take to answer the door—' she stopped mid-rant when she saw the towel.

'How did you lock yourself out?' he asked.

'What do you mean lock myself out?'

'I mean, how did you lock the door from inside?' He looked at the open window and asked, 'Did you reach through the window to lock it?'

'What are you saying, Prayash? Are you high?'

'Suman, I went to take a shower after you gave me the coffee. And wow, it was amazing, the coffee—'

'What coffee?'

'The one that you made me ten minutes ago.'

'Okay, wait. Are you playing some kind of a prank on me?'

'Of course not. You brought me the coffee and told me you'd be back in some time.'

'Prayash, I never made you any coffee. I just got here. You can ask my cab driver if you want.'

'Now, you are playing tricks with me. You came over last night and we had such an awesome time together.'

'Excuse me? Are you trying to tell me that you were with some girl last night, thinking it was me?'

'It was you.'

'Look, you can check with my hotel, at the front desk. I never left the hotel until this morning, Prayash.'

Just then they heard another sound from the kitchen. The couple went in, taking one nervous step at a time. And then they witnessed the impossible: a woman standing near the kitchen shelf who looked exactly like Suman. Prayash and Suman stared

at the imposter. The imposter turned and looked straight into Prayash's eyes.

'You can have her or me. Remember: I will stay young forever while she will become a frigid old hag in a few years' time. What do you want Prayash? I can give you what we had last night … for the rest of your life!'

Prayash appeared dazed, hypnotized.

'Yes, I would want that…' he replied like a robot.

'Then kill her … she doesn't deserve to live,' the imposter ordered.

Prayash turned mechanically to Suman and looked at her with cold eyes.

The Dahini of Manglojodi

The village of Manglojodi, about sixty kilometres from the heartland of Bhubaneshwar, is a serene destination for tourists who flock there in great numbers for birdwatching on the wetlands of Chilika Lake.

Dr Rajdev Patro was not one of those unsuspecting tourists looking to observe swamphens. He had been summoned by the Gram Panchayat to take a look at one of the local boys who had suddenly fallen ill.

A large peepal tree welcomed all to the village and Patro eyed the almost leafless giant as he walked past it.

Shom Nayak, a man of about sixty, with grey hair perfectly tucked under a red turban, welcomed the doctor into a house.

'My son is running our family business in Bhubaneshwar,' the man started explaining as he led the doctor into his son's room, 'He came home for Pujo holidays a few days ago, but then suddenly started coughing up blood. It started last night.' They entered a dimly lit room, which smelled of sweat-soaked linen.

The doctor sat beside the patient. The intrusion awoke the twenty-one-year-old Birbhadra, who opened his eyes to see the doctor. Dr Patro noticed a packet of cigarettes protruding from under his pillow. The young man quickly adjusted the pillow to conceal it.

'How are you feeling, Biru?' the doctor asked, keeping his secret.

‘I … I feel dizzy,’ replied the young man, his voice quivering with the weakness of a sick old man.

Dr Patro held the patient’s hand and measured his pulse while his eyes swept across the room checking for any other intoxicant that might have led to the patient’s current condition. There was a pleading request in the young patient’s eyes, understanding which the doctor turned towards the old father and said, ‘Would you please give us a few minutes?’

The father left without a word. The patient sat up.

‘You know that you are suffering from acute bronchitis because of’—the doctor pulled out the packet of cigarettes—‘this.’

Biru looked around before he spoke. ‘No, doctor. I know why I’m suffering but nobody will believe me,’ he said.

‘Try me,’ the doctor offered to listen.

Biru took a deep breath that crackled in his chest and began his story.

Biru’s story

Asha had returned to visit her wise old jejemaa after a long six years. She had gone from a young teenager, with an acne-riddled face, to a gorgeous girl of nineteen. I could hardly recognize her. The sad part was that even she did not recognize me, rather she did not seem to even remember me. Perhaps it was an effect of city life.

It was mahasashti and everyone had gone to the temple to commemorate Kalaparambha—the day we reveal the face of our Durga.

Asha strolled away from her family and took a tour of the wetlands and the village, capturing beautiful moments with her camera.

She finally entered the village from where the wetlands settled subtly to accommodate the little human population that thrived there. You must have seen that peepal tree and its eerie grandeur at the entrance of our little village. Don't think I am going to make up this story because I am just going to tell what Basu, the potter, witnessed.

Basu's account

After the sun had set, the girl of Debashish Pathi, who lived in a far-away nation, arrived in front of the tree while strolling with her camera. She stopped and kept looking at it while the sun went down. She was yet to be told that no one stood near the tree after sunset because that was when the dahani's spirit was at its strongest and tried to lure people into touching the trunk of the grand tree. The spirit of the evil dahani—a witch in a general sense of the word—was trapped in the tree and had been looking for a body, a host with which to start off her long-due revenge against the villagers, who had hanged her from a branch of the tree and then set her on fire for casting a spell on a newly married

couple.

After five long years, a girl in the form of Asha had finally arrived, ready to be her host. The girl stared at the tree trunk and started walking towards it, as if hypnotized by an unseen force. She reached for one of the branches—the very branch from which the witch was hanged—and plucked something that could have been a flower only visible to her eyes. She went home as if nothing happened.

Biru's Story

Soon afterwards she ran a fever and was confined to bed. What happened next was narrated to me by another eyewitness, Anshuman, the son of the temple priest who had gone there with his father to give the old jejemaa some prashad.

Anshuman's account

She was bedridden, running a high fever. The priest thought the vermillion from Durga maa will give her some relief, so he insisted on going to her room. He dipped the index finger of his right hand in the small box that contained the holy sindoor of the Goddess. But when he came near the unconscious Asha, her body started to levitate. Her parents and the priest tried to pull her down but something far more powerful seemed to hold her mid-air. Before they could do anything, the body floated higher, away from their reach and almost touching the ceiling. Asha started coughing and woke to see that she was floating in the air. She looked at all of us from up there, confused and terrified. But it was something else that made her scream and it was only visible to her. She screamed and coughed blood and hissed into the air, 'I'm coming for all of you. Beware … one by one, you will be none! Revenge shall be mine!'

And then Asha fell on the floor, lifeless.

Biru's Story

The rumor about the witch had all the villagers terrified. Mahasapthami and ashtami were missed by most of our people as they feared for their lives. They said that the spirit of Komila, the evil witch, would hunt down the children of all those responsible for her hanging. Now, doctor, you must not start thinking that I am going to make up a witch story for the purpose of entertainment. What follows is what Asha's grandmother told me.

Jejemaa's account

The witch's name was Komila. She lived a widow's life in the smallest hut in the village. They said her husband was killed with black magic. Married women did not like to send their husbands anywhere near the woman, whom they called dahani. They feared that the lustful witch would lure their men and, through intercourse, drain them of their youth.

Five years ago, infants started dying in the village and everyone believed that it was the work of the dahani. The elders of the village met on a moonless night and decided to finish off the witch for good. They dragged her out of her hut and hanged her from the grand peepal tree. The villagers believed that the peepal, being a holy tree, would trap the restless spirit. With her dying breath, she cursed the twenty-one elders who had passed the verdict and vowed to take the lives of one offspring from each family. The statement angered Shom Nayak, who set the dying woman on fire.

Biru's story

Doctor, by now you must be wondering how I could believe the stories they told me. Well, now I'm going to tell you what I experienced yesterday.

I could not bear the news of Asha's death. I hadn't even had the chance to speak with her. I waited five years just to see her again.

Unable to cope with my disappointment and anger, I went to exact revenge. I swung the axe that I stole from the woodcutter's shed at the peepal's trunk. All the birds around the lake seemed to be disturbed by the act and flocked out of the wetlands immediately. They flew over my head, escaping an unknown evil.

I was emotionally driven and therefore my action was that of a fool. Mistaking my foolhardiness for courage, I drove the axe into the wound I made and, this time, I heard a scream. Everyone in the village did! But it did not take me long to realize that it was not a scream, but laughter—diabolic and piercing. I dropped the axe and ran away holding my ears shut.

I came home and coughed. I coughed a lot and then coughed blood. I locked myself in the room as I wanted to be alone. But then I realized that I was not alone. There were two spirits in the room and one of them warned me not to move from my bed. If I did, then it would kill me too.

The present

The young Biru ended his story and a momentary silence followed. Patro noticed that the young boy was sweating as if his soul were trying to escape. 'Doctor, do you think I made up this story?' he asked, scratching his head in confusion.

'Not at all,' came the doctor's reply.

'Do you think I am crazy?'

'No!' said the doctor, 'You are not crazy, but you are wrong.'

'I … I don't understand, sir.'

'Three things. First, the witch did not lure any man into her hut. It was the other way round: men preyed upon her because she was vulnerable and no one would help or listen to her.'

'What? That cannot be true!' Biru said.

'That is the truth!'

'How do you know?'

'Well, that brings me to the second thing. You said there were two spirits watching you in this room.'

'Yes!'

'Well, there are three.'

'What?' Biru jerked back in surprise, but then seemed convinced that the doctor was joking. 'Sir, I am serious. Please, this is not funny.'

'Apparently, you should have been the third spirit, but someone else did the needless act of touching the banyan tree at sunset today,' Dr Patro said.

'Who?'

'Biru, the wrath of the witch has not just fallen on you or Asha. It has fallen upon many other offspring of the twenty-one elders who had commanded Komila's execution. My father was one of the elders too. I know and you must also know that, while coming to your village, I stopped by the peepal tree. The witch didn't spare me either.'

Biru's eyes opened wide in shock and fear, for, he indeed saw three spirits in the room then. It was time for the fourth one to join them.

Balakrishnan disliked his name ever since he moved to Boston with his parents at the age of six. That was thirteen years ago. The name wasn't American enough so he would call himself Krish.

Thirteen years after moving, he was forced to accompany his father to his native place for fulfilling a long delayed religious service that his family had been performing for ages. Krish was not at all religious and the closest he came to God was in sixth grade, when his teacher Mrs Mary Timberland went on about Adam and Eve.

Krish arrived at his native place, which was a small coastal village called Peringottukara in the Kodungallur region of Kerala. Kodungallur might be famous for its grand Kurumba Bhagavathy temple today, but thousands of years ago, it was the most important port of the Indian subcontinent. It was called Muchiri Pattanam, but as Balakrishnan became Krish, Muchiri came to be known as Muziris.

Muziris was the gateway to India for foreign traders. Arabs, Romans and Greeks flocked into mainland India through this port, trading gold for black pepper and spices. Krish had done a lot of research about whatever was left of the old port. Harmony Park was on top of his list and he saved the visit for a late Sunday afternoon. Since it was a restricted area, he was required to bring an authorized person with him. The authorized person was a local guide who went by the name of Juchettan.

After a rainy Saturday night, Sunday morning welcomed the young non-resident Indian with bright blue skies and wet roads with brown water stagnant on either side. Krish arrived outside the ancient Jewish synagogue. He waited for half an hour for Juchettan and impatience had started seeping into the teenager's mind. He walked around the outer compound of the synagogue clicking pictures on his iPhone XS.

'Excuse me, mister?' came a thin male voice from behind, 'What are you doing here?'

Krish closed his camera app, and turned around, 'I … I'm sorry. I could not resist these beautiful sights.'

'If you could not resist these useless moss-covered walls, then what will you do when you see the old structures inside?' said the thin man, who was about five feet, two inches with a hairless mole on his nose.

'I can't wait for my guide to take me inside.'

'Oh, poor you. Where is he?' the man asked.

'I don't know. He was supposed to be here, like, an hour ago. I can't reach his number either.'

'Must have found some foreign tourists.'

'I was going to pay him too.'

'Well, you are still native-looking, so he cannot churn much money out of you.'

A look of disappointment spread over Krish's face.

'Why don't you come with me? I can give you a tour,' the man offered.

‘But they said I can’t go in without an authorized person.’

‘Child, I live here. How much more authority do you need?’ There was a sparkle of pride in his dull black eyes.

‘Cool! I’m Krish,’ he said and stretched out his right hand.

The little man stepped back and introduced himself with a bow: ‘You can call me Benji.’

‘Benji. Is that a…’

‘A Jewish name?’

‘Hmmm…’

‘Yes, it is short for Benjameen Tudeyya.’

‘I thought Jews didn’t live here anymore.’

‘Well, I do. As for others, most of them left a century ago, but some of us are still hanging around, unnoticed. We don’t look that different from the Nasrani Christians or Namboothiris here. That is why I say we all had common ancestors who came from the same place. One day, it will all go back to the roots.’

‘Interesting.’ The teenager nodded.

‘I will take you inside on one condition.’

‘What is that?’

‘You can click pictures but cannot touch anything, including me. Clear?’

‘I can live with that.’

Benji walked Krish through the old synagogue, showing him wonderful relics and artefacts as he talked about the glorious past of the Jewish people. Benji was short, his hair curled at the ends

and was parted at the centre. His arms were thin and he walked like a goose.

'Did you know that the first Jews to settle in this land were actually descendants of King Solomon?' the little man said as he opened the rusted iron gate that led to Harmony Park.

'I read that on Wikipedia.'

'But did you know that his name was Benjamin?'

'No,' said Krish as he walked into the narrow path that was filled with overgrown creepers on both sides.

'His grave can be found here, along with hundreds of others,' revealed Benji.

'So, the park is actually a cemetery?' Krish asked.

'Yes. According to our belief, the dead rest in the cemetery. So, till the resurrection day, the graves should be protected. And we believe that one day, the world will recognize the glory of our ancestors and that day the dead shall also rise again.'

Krish and Benji entered the cemetery which had many tombstones, and all of them had engravings in Hebrew.

'We usually do not allow non-pious people to enter this place. Even your guide would not have brought you here. But you are lucky you found me.'

'But why?'

'Because, as much as this is a place of resting, it also shelters a sinister dybbuk.'

'Dybbuk?'

'Yes, dybbuk. Dybbuks are malevolent ghosts, waiting for unsuspecting mortals to approach their resting place so that they may possess them.'

Krish laughed. 'So superstitions exist in every religion,' he remarked, thinking about the rituals his father had performed a couple of nights ago.

'As I said, we have a common ancestor,' Benji declared.

'So, what happens when a dybbuk possesses a mortal?'

'Well, every mortal has unfulfilled desires at the time of their death. Only those who had sinful desires become dybbuks. Once they possess a mortal they use that body to perform those sinful desires for as long as the body lasts.'

'How would the person know he is possessed by a dybbuk?'

'They won't. Their souls will be suppressed.'

'It's just plain old superstition,' Krish said as he clicked a picture of one of the tombstones. He was so involved in getting a good

picture that he did not realize that there was a creeper above his right foot, and when he was about to take a step, he tripped and fell on the tombstone. His face hit the eroded stone structure and he shrieked in pain as blood oozed out of his nose and dripped on to the tombstone.

'Who's there?' a voice asked.

Krish got up and wiped off the blood from his nose. He saw a tall man in a white dhoti and shirt staring at him.

'I … I just came to see the place,' Krish answered.

'Krish?' the tall man asked.

'Yes!'

'I'm sorry, I got stuck with something and got late. I had asked you to wait outside the synagogue. Why did you come in?' the tall man inquired.

'Juchettan?'

'Yes, that's me.'

'Oh, I waited for a long time, but then Benji showed me around. He said he had the authority because he lived here,' Krish said, looking around for the short man who was nowhere to be seen.

'Nobody lives here, Krish,' Juchettan said as he gave his handkerchief to the bleeding teenager. He added, 'There is a reason we don't allow outsiders here. This is an old cemetery, and it is haunted by dybbuks who may want to befriend an unsuspecting visitor and possess their bodies. I know it is all a superstition to you, but that is our belief and trust me, many have paid the price for breaking the rule.'

'But Benji was here…'

'There are only five Jews left in this town, and none of them are named Benji.'

'No, it was short for Benjameen Tudeyya.'

'Do you see that tombstone?'

'Yes, I just hit my head on it,' Krish said.

'Well, Mr Benjameen Tudeyya lies beneath it.'

A Night in Bhangarh

Nothing excites me more than narrating my personal experience with the supernatural.

We were shooting our horror feature film amidst the sand dunes of Rajasthan. After finishing up in Jamnagar, we were to move to the next location—the notorious Bhangarh Fort. We had six days of shooting scheduled at the dreaded fort and we were asked by the authorities not to stay back after sunset.

We were nearing the end of the shoot, which meant it would soon be time to party! But, unfortunately, there was no pub or club at which to celebrate the wrap. Since we were deprived of alcohol in Jamnagar, we really wanted to party hard at least once before returning to Mumbai. So, three of us—almost true alcoholics—decided to celebrate on the final night.

Anant, our visual effects supervisor, and Daniella, one of the assistant directors, joined me for an adventurous night out. I had managed to acquire some beer from the nearest liquor store. It was called Black Partridge, a relatively cheap local brew.

'Dude, let's just party here itself, after everyone's gone,' suggested Anant as he pulled back his long strands of hair.

'They won't allow us to stay back after sunset,' Daniella said.

'Nobody's going to find out if we stay put on the eastern chambers of the fort. I have heard that nobody dares walk past the area once the sun goes down,' Anant said confidently.

'What if we get caught?'

'If we are careful, we won't.'

'Okay … but the crew leaves at six in the morning from our hotel.'

'I've arranged for a vehicle for us. Don't worry, we'll be at the hotel by midnight, Cinderella,' Anant assured.

'Cool! Let's do it!'

Daniella and Anant were having this conversation while I was with them, talking to the local guide to arrange for a cab for us at night. I was introduced to our cab driver, Balraj Singh, who was a local. Balraj was a stout Jat who was as tall as me at six feet and three inches.

'Sir, I will not step inside the fort. You can call out or whistle once you are done,' the local man told me.

'If you want you can join us, we have enough drinks,' I offered.

'No, sir, I'm fine. I am worried about you. If something happens in there, please do not expect me to intervene. Spare me the dilemma.'

'Oh, come on, you do not believe in the stories, do you? It's people like me who write those stories, you know,' I said, boasting a little as the writer of the horror movie that we were shooting in the fort.

'You must be a good writer, but the stories about this place are not fiction. Just beware!'

'As you wish.'

'Whatever you do, do not go to the bedroom of Rani Ratnavati.'

'Why?'

'That's the very room from where she threw the bottle of enchanted athar and incurred the wrath of the tantric! The rani's aatma still screams for help.'

'We'll be fine.'

The sun had set and the cast and crew had left for the hotel, leaving only the three of us inside the fort: Anant, Daniella and me. Balbir was waiting outside, most likely chanting the Hanuman Chalisa. The fort was eerily quiet at night. Unlike at other places, there were no chirping crickets around.

It didn't take long for us to find a really great spot in the eastern side of the fort. It was an old room leading to another. The only entrance to that adjacent room was through the room we had chosen to drink in.

At 9.45 p.m., we were already done with nine bottles of beer.

Daniella seemed a little scared when we told her that the room adjacent to ours was actually the Rani's bedroom and that we were drinking in the queen's closet.

'Why did you guys choose this room?' she asked.

'That is the whole point of our adventurous night out. There are no ghosts, yaar. Come on, people die every minute but have we ever seen ghosts—even once?' Anant said.

'It's only the mind that creates these fears. You have to trust me on that,' I added.

'Of course, Mr Writer!' said Anant, pulling out his pack of Marlboros. He lit one cigarette, smoked a bit and passed it to me.

'But still, I don't like it. Can we close that door, please? If you guys had told me this was the queen's closet, I would not have come here.' Daniella was throwing timid glances at the wooden door that led to the cursed queen's bedroom.

'Fine! I'll close it for you,' Anant said and got up. He walked all the way to the door and closed it. The wooden door had become rusty and it took him some force. 'Is this fine?' he said after bolting it from outside.

I locked the door to the room where we were seated as well, just so that nobody caught us having our little adventure. The cigarette was almost burnt out, so I dropped it on the floor and extinguished whatever was left with my right foot.

'Hmm…' Daniella said.

I could tell from her eyes that she was already drunk and was about to pass out.

'I wish I could lock my ex-boyfriend inside that freaking room,' she said, clearly drunk enough to bring that up.

'We'll do that next time.' I chuckled as I opened another bottle of the local beer.

One thing that I can tell you about that local beer is that it gave you a high very quickly. I was worried about Daniella, who was not used to drinking the local stuff.

'Did you know that the queen Ratnavati was cursed by the tantric to haunt the fort? All because of a failed attempt at seducing the woman?' Anant said out of the blue.

I really did not want him to speak about all those myths in front of Daniella.

'And what's worse is the fact that after she was killed in a battle between Bhangarh and Ajabgarh, she was cursed to return one day in an undead form. Do you know what that means, guys?' he asked.

'Dude, knock it off,' I said, noticing the fear spreading over Daniella's face.

'It means that her spirit is still haunting these rooms. What bullshit!' he said and started laughing.

His laughter echoed within the closed chamber and I could tell from Daniella's face that she wanted to leave.

'That's it. You're drunk, dude. Let's leave now,' I said, getting up from the floor.

'Come on, don't be pus—' Anant stopped and censored his words, 'don't be a chicken.'

'Yeah, I think we should go too,' Daniella said, also getting up. I picked up the remaining bottles and put them back in the carton when, suddenly, we heard something. It was the jingling sound of anklets.

'Did you hear that?' Daniella asked, her pupils dilated.

'No, I did not,' I lied, worried about her.

'I did, dude,' Anant said, drunk as a skunk.

'That's it, we're leaving now. It's already ten! Let's get going,' I said.

I waddled in a semi-drunk state across the room towards my visual effects supervisor who was still on the floor. Daniella had already reached the exit when, suddenly, we heard knocks on the closed door. The knocks were coming from inside Rani Ratnavati's bedroom. All three of us looked at each other in shock. Maybe we were too drunk and probably imagining the sounds together. Then, the knocking continued.

'What the hell!' Anant said, getting up.

The knocking grew more intense and then the door to the closet also started rumbling. We were scared to death. Both the doors were being knocked at from the other side until the door to our room broke open and in came some local boys with torches and sticks.

'What the hell are you guys doing in here?' said one of the twenty-somethings who broke into the chamber.

'You shameless city folk!' he said, disgustedly eyeing the cigarette butts. 'You should not be here at all. Who gave you permission to stay back?' he asked angrily.

'There was someone inside that room. I heard knocks on the door,' Daniella told the boy.

'So now you too have experienced the truth of this haunted place. There is no other entrance to the room, sister. That sound came from Rani Ratnavati, who's still waiting to find a body to

possess,' the boy revealed. 'We saw a car while patrolling the fort. Your driver told us that you were drinking inside. We know that you people do not believe the old stories, but then … you can at least be respectful of our beliefs.' He turned to Anant and remarked, 'And then they label us intolerant!'

'Whoever or whatever is inside that room, wanted to get out badly. We could tell by the way it knocked on the door,' I said.

'We are glad you didn't end up dead,' the boy said with a gleaming tear in his eye.

As we walked out of that cursed fort, I heard more knocks from inside. Desperate knocks on the doors of eternity to get out for once and forever. We had encountered a supernatural entity but even to this day Anant, our visual effects supervisor, keeps saying that the knocks on the door were not from a ghost, but a wild animal or rodent trapped in the room. Well, you can believe what you want, but I'm sure what I heard was no trapped mouse. It was an encounter with the supernatural in the most haunted place in Rajasthan.

NH-1A, 2001

'So you are suggesting that these gorges will be filled with water after twenty years?' Moosah, the driver, asked the American scientist who was being taken from the airport to the Indian army's lab facility in the valley.

'No, my friend. I am telling you that these gorges will be filled with water within the next twenty years. These mountains have been silent for quite a long time, you know,' said Dr Chris Cooper as he pressed the reset button on the gravimeter that he had kept open on the empty seat next to him.

'What about the mountains, sir?' Moosah asked as he watched the scientist through his rear-view mirror.

'Well, the rate at which the ice has been been melting is alarming. At this rate, you will have a brand new Ganges by the end of the decade,' he said and laughed at his little joke.

Moosah was fluent in English and Hindi. International tourists found his company helpful in the region and most of them left him handsome rewards. But despite understanding the words, the poor man did not find any humour in the American's comment.

‘Well, you do not have to be worried. We are going to find out why they are melting and what measures can be taken to prevent catastrophic effects. But first,’ Dr Cooper fixed his gaze at the instrument and said, ‘this little thing should start working again.’

‘What is it?’ the driver asked curiously. He had been waiting all along to know about it.

‘It is a seismic-electromagnetic gravimeter. My students back in MIT made it,’ the scientist said proudly.

Moosah hummed in response. The poor driver had no clue what it meant and he simply nodded.

Sensing the curiosity in the driver’s tone, the scientist explained in layman’s language, ‘This machine measures the change of gravitational energy inside any uncontained matter, like air or water or the inside of a tree. In simpler words, this machine can detect the presence of invisible energy.’

‘So this machine can detect invisible things liked jinns?’ he inquired with great intrigue.

‘Moosah,’ the scientist declared, ‘anything and everything unknown to mankind will be hunted down by science.’

‘I hope your science will be able to save you when we pass above the khooni nala.’

‘Kyuni naelaa?’ the American made an effort to pronounce the words.

‘Yes! Khooni nala or killer rivulet. It is a stretch of road on the way to Banihal tunnel that has seen a lot of paranormal activity in the recent past,’ the driver said as he hit the accelerator.

‘Where is this killer rivulet?’ the scientist asked taking in the beautiful hills on either side of the road.

‘Right here, we just entered the zone.’

Dr Cooper’s heart skipped a beat. He studied the surroundings with the studiousness of an eager man of science.

‘It is a haunted place. Can you see that tunnel?’ the driver took one hand off the steering wheel and pointed towards the structure within the rocks on the left side of the road.

The scientist nodded.

‘People living here believed that about thirty years ago, there was a colonel who crashed his vehicle and was killed inside the tunnel. His body was left to rot. Since he did not get a proper funeral, his spirit is still wandering here. He is the cause of all the accidents that take place in this very area. Many vehicles have been affected. The moment cars or bikes enter this zone, drivers lose control of the vehicle.’ The driver looked at the scientist in the

rear-view mirror again and said, 'There have been over fifty accidents here in the last ten years. People who escaped narrowly say that the ghost changed into a tiger and pounced on the windshield while they were driving. Others have mentioned that he appears in the form of a woman in a black dress. Usually, these types of activities occur at night, so it is safe to travel in the day.'

'But why does this freaking ghost want to kill others?' the scientist remarked. 'Tell me something Moosah…'

'Yes, sir?'

'I assume that you must have driven through here many times. Have you ever encountered the ghost?' Dr Cooper asked.

'I chant the Ayat Al-Kursi while passing through this place, which I am going to do now, sir. Evil spirits can never attack us while chanting the greatness of the Almighty Allah!'

'Moosah, fear is a powerful and instinctive human emotion. It kept our ancestors alive in the presence of predators and other dangers. But fear as an emotion is purely psychological, and when you surrender to it without questioning it by personal experience, then you fall prey to it. This ghost of yours, you have never seen it. You fear it, and thus without actually exploring the unknown, you have created a psychological shield in the form of this Quranic verse that you chant. You must look beyond the myth and see the truth: the truth that there is no such thing as a ghost.'

'And those accidents?'

'They are just like you. People gave in to the stories that they heard from others. Their minds must have tricked them into believing that there was something wrong with the path, which eventually led to involuntary sensory deflections. And when the sensory nerves go on a chaotic strike, then that will make you see and hear things that do not exist, and you lose control of your motor activity.' The scientist finished his explanation, and waited for a positive reaction from the driver.

'It's very interesting, but I still think the ghost exists.'

'Okay, let's do one thing. Today, you are not going to pray or chant any verse while we are passing over this killer rivulet. Let us see if anything happens. I know you are a customer-oriented driver and therefore you will listen to me,' Dr Cooper said.

'Sure, sir,' Moosah said, reluctantly.

At first, the Qualis went smoothly over the badly constructed road. They were almost exiting the haunted zone when, suddenly, the driver saw a tiger pounce at the bonnet. Shocked, he turned

the steering wheel and while doing so, he noticed a woman in a black dress sitting in the seat next to him, her eyes red and skin decayed. Before they knew it, the car went off track and into the gorge, crashing against a rock.

The door on the backside burst open sending shards of glasses in all directions. Dr Cooper came out of the wreckage, badly injured. He pulled open the half-broken front door and checked Moosah's pulse. He was dead.

The battered scientist had to walk up the bridge to call for help. He could barely feel his legs. He started towards the bridge when he heard a beeping sound coming from inside the toppled car. He recognized the sound and it shocked him. He limped back to the car and pulled out the gravimeter. He tried to stop it by pressing on a button but the beeping would not stop. It was showing a reading—a disturbing one.

Is this a gravitational anomaly? Cooper wondered but then he remembered what the illiterate driver had remarked some time ago: So this machine can detect invisible things liked jinns…

A chill ran down his spine as he felt a strong presence right behind him. Fear had taken over his once sceptical mind. In that moment, he wished he could chant the Ayat Al-Kursi.

The haunting of a convent in Ranchi

Rain poured down on Ranchi that night. The day had been brutal too, with Naxal-related violence in the city centre, due to which the sisters of Our Lady of Fatima Convent had to cut short their excursion and return to the convent with police protection. Sister Gemma was able to pocket one strawberry cupcake from the bakery where the sisters had gathered to celebrate the birthdays of two orphan girls from their convent: Risha and Nisha. Both Risha and Nisha were found at a railway station by Sister Celsa when they were little. She was kind enough to bring the two little girls with her and, ever since, they had been staying with the sisters at the convent with their newfound names and faith in Jesus Christ.

Under the benevolent mentorship of Sr Celsa, Risha and Nisha were able to put behind their violent past, which had roots in Naxalism, and Nisha was especially focussed on becoming a nun like her role model, Sr Celsa.

Sister Gemma was the exact opposite of Sr Celsa. She was strict and merciless, and always kept to herself. Back at the bakery, when Sister Gemma ordered her favourite strawberry cupcake, she was told that it was the only one left, and knowing that Risha might also want the same, the nun went to the counter and

pocketed the cupcake before anyone else could know about it.

When they arrived at the convent, everything was so hauntingly quiet that it felt like somebody had died there and everyone was in mourning. The rain started pouring heavily after sunset and by the time it was seven, the sky was pitch black and the electricity had already been cut off by the substation. The nuns had gone to the altar for their evening prayer and the massive idol of Jesus Christ on the crucifix at the altar formed a dark shadow on the floor as the room was lit only by flickering candle lights, and the occasional flash of lightning through the window. Risha and Nisha, who were kneeling at the far corner of the room, could not pray properly because of the thunder.

'Shh…' Risha nudged Nisha's elbow with her own.

'What is it?' Nisha asked, trying to concentrate on the prayer.

'Hitler has a cupcake.' Risha had re-baptized Sr Gemma as Hitler, and everyone in the school also called her by that name—behind her back, of course.

'So?'

'So, I want it. It's my birthday and Hitler hid it in her bag while we were being taken out from the bakery by the police. It's my favourite and she knew I would order it.'

'Risha, let it be. You should not fall prey to temptations of the devil,' Nisha advised.

'Tell that to Hitler,' Risha said looking at Sister Gemma, who was still saying her prayer. 'I'm sneaking inside her room and finding that cupcake. I have the right to have it.'

'Fine, do as you please. But if you get caught, please do not drag me into it.'

'Sure thing, sister!'

After prayer, the nuns retired to their rooms.

Nisha and Risha were in their little chamber and Nisha was fast asleep in the lower bed while Risha was making plans. Suddenly, she heard a woman scream. It came from one of the rooms.

'Did you hear that?' Nisha asked from the lower bed.

'What happened?' Risha asked.

'I think it was Sr Gemma,' Nisha said.

'She must have seen a cockroach or something. Oh, I hope the cockroach did not eat the cupcake.'

Soon after, they heard the siren of an ambulance as it arrived at the convent's front yard. The rain drops falling on the metallic body of the ambulance made a distinct sound. There were sounds

of hurried, wet footsteps and a tense exchange of words that were unclear.

Suddenly, Sister Celsa came into the girls' room, panting for breath.

'It's Sister Gemma. She's unable to breathe.' She looked at the girls and then fixed her gaze on Nisha. 'Nisha, could you please accompany us to the hospital as the driver speaks Munda.'

Nisha was a local, while the nuns were mostly from Kerala and spoke only English and Malayalam. Unlike Risha, Nisha was fluent in her mother tongue.

'Yes, sister, I will come right away.' Nisha got dressed and left with the tense nun.

Risha felt like she was all alone in the convent. The rain got worse and she heard the ambulance leave. Her mind kept prompting her to sneak into the absent nun's room. Finally, after two hours of battling with her conscience, Risha left the room without her slippers.

It was terribly quiet inside the convent. As she passed through the hallway in the darkness of the night, all the stories she had ever heard about the devil and demons came to life in her mind. When the lightning flashed on the walls, it would reveal one of those painfully scary paintings of saints and demons. They said that the devil would send his demons to lure souls of innocents on nights like these. However, Risha wondered if she was already under the influence of the devil. She tiptoed and got to Sr Gemma's room. She unbolted the door and crept in.

The room was cold with only a few pieces of furniture. There was just one bed, a table, a chair and a medium-sized cupboard. Everything was made of wood. There was a crucifix hanging on the wall near the window, and a rack of books right under it. Right next to the holy Bible sat a small bag, staring at Risha. Her heart raced as she approached it. Carefully, she unzipped it and reached in. She felt the soft, spongy surface of the cupcake and her mouth watered as she pulled it out. She was about to eat it when she heard a sound from outside the room. Her first reaction was to place the cupcake back inside the bag, but when she heard the door opening, Risha accidentally placed it on the rack and then hid inside the cupboard.

The door opened and Sister Gemma marched in angrily, grunting. 'Nothing can stop me from having that cupcake, not even that stupid doctor. I waited all day.'

Risha prayed not to get caught and looked out through the cupboard's keyhole. Nothing could be seen clearly in the dark.

The nun was surprised to see the cupcake lying outside the bag. 'Those rats must have tried to steal it. Nobody can have it except for me!'

There were sounds of the bag closing and then the mattress sinking a bit as the nun sat on the bed. Risha saw the figure of the nun on the bed and it appeared as if the woman was lying down for the night. Risha started feeling suffocated inside the cupboard but was afraid to get out. Eventually, she blacked out inside it.

The next day, a beam of white light woke Risha as the door of the cupboard opened.

'Are you an angel?' Risha murmured as she woke up.

'Risha, it's me. What are you doing here? Everyone is worried!' said Nisha.

'I … I just could not stop thinking about the cupcake. So, I came to steal it in the night, after Hitler was gone.'

'Everyone is so upset about last night, and your disappearance made it worse. Now come, at least the fact that you are alright will give relief to Sister Celsa and the others,' Nisha scolded her sister.

Risha came out of the cupboard, stretching her arms. She looked around the room and then at the bed, 'I had it in my hand when Hitler came into the room. Then I had to hide inside the cupboard. Thank God I was not caught.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I had it. Look!' Risha turned and pointed towards the bag on the rack. 'The cupcake is…' Risha's eyes widened in shock as she could

only see the wrapper of the cupcake.

'You are so shameless, Risha! How could you eat her cupcake?' Nisha said.

'No, it was her. Sister Gemma came into the room and ate the cupcake. I heard her,' Risha defended herself with misty eyes.

'Really?'

'Yes!'

'You mean to say that Sister Gemma came all the way from the hospital to eat that cupcake?' Nisha inquired sternly.

'Yes, yes, yes!'

'Risha, Sister Gemma died last night.'

'What?'

'She never even made it out of the hospital room.' Nisha revealed.

A tear rolled down Risha's face, for she could not believe what she had heard or seen the previous night. No one would believe her, but what she had seen in the room would forever be a thing of horror.

Muhnochwa

The urban legend of Balia, UP

The night was cold and thick with smog. The chill bit at Amrish as he followed his friend Sankar into the wastelands behind their village.

'How far do we have to go now?' Amrish asked anxiously.

Sankar, who was at least a foot shorter and a bit darker than Amrish, had everything planned. He walked on briskly.

'Great! Now you won't even answer me,' Amrish whined.

'Bhai, just be patient. You won't regret this. Just move quickly. If someone catches us, then both of us are gone,' Sankar warned without stopping.

'This better be good.'

There was no response from the shorter companion. They passed through the deserted wasteland and entered a smaller territory marked with thorny kikar trees. Nothing else grew on that yellow soil but the small kikars. Sankar found a place right at the center of the area and installed himself under a tree. Amrish sat next to him.

'Where is that torch?' Sankar inquired.

Amrish pulled out a small torch from his pyjama pocket.

'Good, now shine me some light. Keep the beam on the ground

or someone might see us,' Sankar instructed.

'Alright!'

Sankar's reached into his pocket and pulled out a small paper pouch. He put it on the ground and his companion looked on curiously as Sankar opened the pouch. There were two small, dark balls, the size of ball bearings found in his father's cycle repair shop.

'What is that, bhai?' Amrish asked.

'This, my friend,' Sankar revealed as he picked up one of the balls and handed it over to Amrish, 'is what takes rishis and munis to heaven and beyond.'

'What?' Amrish exclaimed while examining the ball in his fingers.

'I got it from Banaras. From a baba. You will not get this anywhere else. It cost me a fortune,' Sankar explained as he picked the remaining one off the ground.

'Is this bhaang?'

Sankar laughed. 'Bhaang is just baby food. This is the grandfather of all intoxicants. It is a mix of seven herbs. You just open your mouth,' Sankar instructed as he demonstrated, 'and place it under your tongue. Then let it melt there. You will be out of this world in a few moments.'

'But how will I get home?'

'Oh, shut up! The effect will wear off in an hour. Then we can go back.'

'Is it safe?'

'Absolutely. Like I said, sages and saints use this for meditation. Now, just have it and let me enjoy mine.'

Amrish had always been the nervous one. He took one more look at the round pill. He thought he heard thunder, but it could have been his fear making him imagine things. Sankar was already swaying to the inaudible tune of the intoxicant, dancing in the world of his mind. Amrish closed his eyes and put the pill under his tongue. He felt it butter down into a viscous honey-like substance. Slowly, the sound of the crickets morphed into sweeter sounds moving to a crescendo.

About fifteen minutes later, both the friends were high.

'This is just amazing…' said Amrish.

'Isn't it?'

'Oh yes! I wish this lasted longer. You got more?'

'No. Just enjoy it while it lasts,' Sankar said.

Amrish got up from his place, which alarmed Sankar.

'Where are you going?' Sankar asked.

'Nature's call!'

Amrish waddled towards the tree on the opposite side, though to him it felt like he was hovering over the ground. He unfastened the drawstring of his pyjama and waited for his body to relieve itself. However, through the rustling leaves of the kikar, he saw the sky and it seemed like something was happening behind the clouds. As if the clouds were moving and producing the gurgling sound again. Amrish tried to focus his eyes on the clouds until he realized that those were not really clouds but huge plumes of smoke, and they were coming from a disc-shaped gigantic black structure that was moving above.

'Bhai!' Amrish yelled to summon his friend as he kept his eye fixed on the moving object in the sky.

'If it is not coming, then don't try so hard,' Sankar said.

'No, bhai, it is coming over us, and it is huge!'

'It's probably the intoxicant doing its job. It will be back to its original little size in half an hour. Don't worry!' Sankar chuckled.

'No … I'm not talking about that. Come here!'

Cursing his friend, Sankar got up and walked towards Amrish.

'Look!' Amrish said, pointing to the sky, 'Do you see what I am seeing?'

At first, Sankar thought it was just the clouds but then he also saw the movement, and his eyes popped open wide, 'What is that?' he exclaimed.

'I don't know. Is it our imagination?'

'No, both of us can't imagine it.'

'What if I am imagining it and I am also imagining that you are imagining it in my imagination…' Amrish tried to reason.

'Shh … Shut up!'

As the object moved in the sky and came right above them, a strong wind blew and kicked up dust. The two friends coughed and covered their eyes and noses and tried to run. They heard a thunderous explosion in the sky and the impact made them fall. For a moment, it felt like everything had ended, but soon the sound was gone and so was the dusty wind. Amrish and Sankar opened their eyes and looked at the sky. There was nothing there. They looked at each other, confused.

'What kind of stupid things do you bring?' Amrish said, 'I am never doing anything with you ever again!'

'I'm sure it was not the intoxicant. I saw it too, it was real!' Sankar explained.

'I … I'm leaving. The whole effect has been drained out now. I'm going home,' Amrish said and walked away without turning back.

'Oye, Amrish … come back.'

Sankar finally got up and decided to go back with his friend. It was dark and dangerous to be alone, and besides, like Amrish had mentioned, the effect had worn off. He did not call out his friend's name again—worried it might alert the villagers—so he followed quietly. When he was out of the clump of kikar trees, he was startled to see that Amrish had not made it out yet. It was quite strange because it was a straight path and Amrish was in sight right until he left the wooded area.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps behind him. They were quick. Instinctively, Sankar turned around. He saw a tall and dark figure move back into the shadow of the trees. Sankar walked back, following what had to be his friend.

'Amrish bhai!' Sankar said in a low voice, 'Did you forget something?'

There was no response and out of the blue, the tall figure seemed to merge into one of the kikar trees. A puzzled Sankar scratched his head when he felt something drop on his forehead from above. Sankar wiped the warm liquid off his forehead with a finger. It was blood.

Sankar nervously looked up and saw his friend's body lying on the thorny branches of the kikar. Sankar ran for his life, unmindful of the thorns that scratched him as he darted through the tress. His heart pounded as he saw the end of the woods, but before he could reach it, something pulled him back and he fell to the ground. From there, he saw what he could never explain. It was nothing like the rakshasas that his grandmother had spoken of. It was a hideous creature with a shining suit, lights on its chest, arms longer than the legs, and steel-sharp nails which slashed at Sankar's face. He was almost catatonic with fear when he saw the creature turn back to the tree with the dead body of his friend, Amrish. It simply touched the body, and then a beam of light appeared from the sky and both of them vanished. Sankar's heartbeat started to settle and he got his breath back, suddenly aware that he was bleeding.

The next day, Sankar was found by his cousin. He was unconscious in the wasteland, with his face scarred. Nobody believed his story at first (of course, he never told anyone about the pills from Varanasi), but soon the village started witnessing the menace of a demon who would scratch the faces of people with blade-like nails in the night. The demon spread its terror across other villages of Uttar Pradesh in 2002. The villagers of Uttar Pradesh called the demon 'Muhnochwa', or the one who claws the face. To this day, the mystery remains unsolved. After all, who would believe Sankar's story of demons from the sky?

The Final Song of Dumas

Beaches bring out the philosopher in just about anybody who stares at the vast waters. Prashmit arrived at Dumas beach with no intention of reflecting on life and the way the man is dwarfed by the glory of nature. He was not there to question his own existence but to investigate the existence of paranormal entities rumoured to haunt the beach. Prashmit, Ananya and Ahmed were three avid bloggers who planned to crack down on myths about haunted places in their home state of Gujarat. This was their first attempt.

The sun hung low with an orange aura and everything on the sea looked red while the sand on the shore was black.

'They say it's black because this used to be a Hindu burial ground. The spirits of the dead walk on this sand at night, giving it the dark colour,' Ahmed read out from his cell phone screen.

'Hindus don't have burial sites. Only cremation grounds!' Ananya corrected while she slapped her friend's head.

'No, what he said is actually true. There are certain Hindu families who bury their dead,' Prashmit said, his eyes fixed on the line between the sky and the sea. He clicked a picture of a wave as it broke against the shore.

'Well, there are so many people here. I really don't think it's haunted,' Ananya said, 'Look, there's a chana-wallah. Let's have some spicy chana.'

Ananya never liked to miss a good eat. Five minutes later, she was munching on masala chana and sev, of which Ahmed occasionally had a bite or two. Prashmit didn't seem to care at all. The chana-wallah asked if they wanted something more.

'Tell me, is this place really haunted?' Prashmit asked the man in Gujarati.

'What, sir? You look so educated but you are talking like my ignorant wife!' the chana seller-replied.

'But we have heard that the spirits of the dead roam this place at night!'

'Then you chose the wrong time, sir! You should have come here at night. But you should check the burial site at the outer beach.'

'Outer beach?'

'Yes, there are four beaches here. Each one gets lonelier than the previous one and the last one is at the end of the land. It is cold and the burial site is attached to it. The local villagers of Duma do not go there after 9 p.m. People who strolled there at night heard a weird humming music from the seas. Some never returned…'

'Great story! Here,' Prashmit gave the man a fifty-rupee note and said, 'keep the change.'

The trio started walking towards the burial site when the chana-wallah called them from behind, 'Sir, one can only hear the music when the tide is at its highest!'

A few minutes later, the three were at the burial site. The sun had set.

The burial site had a few conical structures popping out of the ground that were about three feet high. They didn't have any markings. Intrigued, Prashmit placed his right eye on his camera's viewfinder and clicked a picture. When he checked the preview on the screen, he was shocked.

'What the hell!' he exclaimed, looking at the picture that appeared all black.

Ananya took something off the camera which Prashmit was holding and remarked, 'Idiot, you have to remove the lens cap first!'

All three of them enjoyed a hearty laugh. They clicked more pictures of the place and nothing unusual happened. Prashmit started walking towards the fourth beach.

'Dude, I'm not coming with you,' Ahmed said.

'But why?' asked Prashmit.

'It is too dark and eerie.'

'But that's our purpose, right?'

'Yeah, you guys go ahead. I will listen to your story when you come back. I will be in the car at the parking.' He walked away.

The fourth beach

The air was thinner and the cold wind felt like little needles. Under the light of the moon, Prashmit could only see what the dark clouds allowed him to. Ananya was scared and held on to

Prashmit's hand.

Suddenly, Prashmit stopped and started looking around, listening.

'What happened?' Ananya asked.

'Did you hear that?' he asked, straining to listen.

'Hear what?'

'That sound. It's coming from the sea. From those rocks,' he said, pointing towards the cluster of large rocks just a few feet off the shore.

'I don't hear anything, yaar,' she said.

'Listen carefully. It sounds like a flute … or is it a woman's voice?'

'Cut the crap, Prashmit. Let's go back,' she said and pulled her friend back.

Prashmit seemed to be in a trance that was pulling him towards the rocks.

'Come back, yaar.' She pulled harder but lost her grip and fell on the sand. Her hip hit something solid. She used her mobile phone's flashlight to see what she had hit. It was a human skull, staring at her with its hollow sockets.

She screamed and looked ahead at Prashmit. But he had already stepped into the water, walking towards the rocks as if something was calling him. Horrified, she saw him disappear into the sea.

She got up and ran.

At the parking area, Ahmed finished reading the articles on the beach. Everyone wrote the same thing, it was as if one person

posted a rumour and every other blogger was spinning off the same article with a different set of words. It was not interesting anymore, but he was wondering how long his friends would take to realize it was all a hoax. All other vehicles had left.

'What are you still doing here?' came a shrill voice from the side window.

Ahmed turned and saw an old villager standing there with a lantern, peeping through the window of the car. 'You should not be here. It is not the right night for men.'

'Oh, you mean the ghosts, right? We are here to bust that myth,' Ahmed replied casually.

'Ghosts? You think there are ghosts on that beach? No!'

'Then?'

'Jal pisaachas!'

'What?'

'Every night, during high tide, the jal pisaach comes to the surface of the water, taking the form of a gorgeous female and luring men with her hypnotizing song. She can't come on the land because she is only half woman, her lower body is that of a demon. So she chooses to stay on the rocks, singing her evil song. If you try hard, then you can also hear it. If you can't hear it, then that means—'

'Ahmed…' screamed Ananya who was running towards the car.

Ahmed got out of the car and rushed to her.

'What happened? Where is Prashmit?' Ahmed asked anxiously.

Ananya panted, pointing towards the rocks in the distance.

'What?'

'Prashmit … went … he drowned…' she said between breaths.

'Didn't you try to save him?'

'He said he heard some humming sound from the rocks … I tried to stop him but he—'

The old villager interrupted and said in a grave tone, 'If you can't hear the song it means she has paused to feast on her prey…'

Inspired by the haunting of Chudial Baudi

March 2011

The sun smiled through the thick fog that covered the valley. Ravi Yadav, a popular horror writer, drove his Hyundai Santro up the road that would take him to his friend's resort in Knollswood. Unmindful of the cold, he had his windows open, and the freezing air did little to calm his mind, which was still searching for motivation. He looked at the pack of Marlboro cigarettes lying on the dashboard. It was empty and he desperately needed a smoke. After hitting the accelerator for about thirty minutes uphill, he spotted a small tea shop near a turning. He parked his car near the shop and got out. The shop was serving some locals and the owner appeared overtly courteous.

'I need a pack of Marlboro,' Ravi demanded.

'Sorry sahib, we only have Cavanders Gold Leaf. That's what people smoke here.'

Cavanders was a brand of filter-less cigarettes, and that was the last thing Ravi would ever smoke. However, there was no other

alternative.

'Okay, give me a pack,' the writer ordered, hoping that he would find some branded cigarettes at his friend's resort.

'Do you want anything else, sahib?' the shop owner asked with a wink.

Ravi knew that tourists were fond of smoking weed at the hill station and even small tea stalls sold intoxicants at reasonable prices. But all he wanted next was alcohol and he knew there was plenty of Scotch waiting for him at the resort.

'No, thank you. How much?'

'That will be twenty,' said the shopkeeper.

Ravi handed him a twenty-rupee note and walked back into his Santro.

'Sir, be careful. You seem like an outsider, so I am warning you not to take the road uphill after sunset. It is very dangerous because a ghost haunts that path,' the shop keeper said.

Ravi ignored the warning as he did not really believe in ghosts or the supernatural. He simply wrote about them and perhaps that was the reason why his books were not selling anymore. His stories were repetitive tales about an undead woman's spirit craving for men's flesh and other clichés. People were tired of them and the new generation was more interested in gore than ghosts. His publisher had recently asked him to try writing about a serial killer. But Ravi had a story in his mind, and it was old school just like him: a vengeful female spirit who was haunting the hills and preying on unsuspecting male travellers. He had already talked about it with his friend and Vincent had arranged for his stay at the notorious McCauley Villa. It was an opportunity for him to overcome his writer's block.

After several bends and turns, he got a straight path to drive on, but before he could press the accelerator, he saw a woman draped in a misty white saree. She was on the bumpy road and asking for a lift.

Was this the ghost of the hills? the writer wondered and pulled over.

'Hi, where are you going?' the writer asked.

'Where this path leads, I wish to go there. Will you take me?' the woman inquired.

'Yes, please sit.'

Ravi opened the door for the woman and she got in. He noticed that the woman did not have any of those peculiarly attractive features found in horror stories. In fact, the woman was middle-

aged and the right side of her face was covered in bruises.

'Are you alright?' Ravi asked.

'It would be nice if you do not ask me any questions. Just drop me on the way,' the woman said in a monotone.

'Sure.'

'What is your name?' he asked.

There was no reply and Ravi realized that the woman really meant what she said. She did not talk for another twenty minutes on the road and suddenly at one turn, where the fog got particularly dense, she said, 'Yes, please stop there.' She spoke as if she could see what was ahead of them. Ravi could see a signboard that was a few inches away from the vehicle.

It read 'St. Michael's.'

'Are you sure you want to get off here?'

'No questions, please.'

'Do you want me to accompany you?'

'I live here, I can manage. Please take care of yourself,' the woman said and walked into the fog until she disappeared completely.

Ravi felt strange and a little disappointed that the woman was not of the supernatural kind. Of course, ghosts only existed in stories like the ones he wrote. He started the vehicle.

Thirty minutes later, he arrived at his friend's resort. Vincent was more than happy to receive Ravi and after a delicious dinner, Vincent and Ravi sat down over a glass of Scotch to talk about their recent adventures.

It was a cozy setup, the resort's lounge area. There were not many guests that night, so they had the entire lounge to themselves. A bottle of Scotch and packets of Marlboro lay on the teak centre table. Vincent made sure that his writer friend could enjoy a vintage atmosphere and therefore had specially lit up the room with candles placed in the Victorian-style chandelier.

'I am sure you will find inspiration in McCauley Villa. I especially got it on rent for you. The owners are not in India. They have been in London since 1953,' Vincent informed his friend as the dim, flickering light of the candles illuminated his patchy, pale face.

'Thanks, I just want this one to work out,' Ravi said sipping his Scotch.

'It will. Just be careful as the hills are home to brown bears. Don't open the door if you hear a bark at night as it might be a barking deer.'

'Barking deer? Is it dangerous?'

'No, but usually a barking deer is followed by wolves or bears, and they, my friend, are dangerous.'

'Anything else?'

'Not really. The locals talk about the lady who haunts the villa, but I'm sure you do not believe in all that.'

'But tell me about it, please,' Ravi insisted.

'Well, the Villa used to be the vacation home of Lord John McCauley. He would come here every summer with his family, but in the summer of 1939 he came to the place alone. A maid used to work for them and, on a stormy night, the maid came knocking at McCauley's door.' Vincent took a pause to enjoy his drink.

'And then?' Ravi asked eagerly.

'The maid's husband, Toshi, had been abusing her physically for quite some time and that night he had crossed all limits after getting drunk. She ran away, afraid she would die at the hands of her mad husband. She did not have any place to go, so she came straight to the English gentleman at McCauley Villa. Looking at her torn blouse and burnt saree, he felt pity, but more than that … he had evil and lustful thoughts. He let her in to stay for the night, but at midnight, when she was asleep, he pounced on her. He forced himself on her, and the maid, who could not bear the memories of rape, burnt herself to death outside the house, near the fir that overlooks the cliff.'

'And?'

'The Englishman swept the remnants off the cliff, and stayed mum about it, until the following night, when the maid appeared again at his door, this time drenched in blood. He ran for his life and came down to my grandfather's cottage and confessed everything to him. John said that he could see the maid coming for him, but my grandfather never saw anything at all. My grandfather believed that the Englishman had fallen prey to guilt. John ran out of my grandfather's house at midnight, screaming.' Vincent paused again.

Ravi had grown restless as he wanted to know what happened in the end, 'Come on, man. Stop building suspense, that's my job as a writer.'

'Well,' Vincent said getting up from his leather sofa, 'the next morning, a local police constable found Lord John McCauley dead in the valley. When my grandfather told the constable about the maid, the police went to check on her house. The house was a

bloody sight—the husband had been chopped into pieces that were strewn all over the floor. To this day, nobody could find the maid, nor her remains. Obviously, nobody is going to jump off the cliff to look for remains.'

'That is one gruesome tale. My publisher loves blood and gore.'

'Ever since then, nobody had the courage to step inside the Villa after the sky goes dark. You, my friend, are the first one to do so after seventy-three years.'

'What was the name of the maid?'

'Najma.'

'I would love to see her house too, you know—the place where she sliced up her husband. It would be interesting to capture some pictures of the house.'

'I would rather you wake up alive in the morning at the Villa,' said Vincent with a chuckle.

'You don't believe in it, do you?'

'How does it matter? I'm not the one who is going to spend the night, am I?'

'By the way, I also had a strange encounter earlier today.'

'Is it?'

'Well, I had stopped by to purchase a pack of cigarettes at the tea shop at the second milestone.'

'Oh yes, Balu Thakur, poor old chap. He doesn't keep your brand, you know.'

'I know. I managed with Cavanders.'

'Go on. He must have told you about the ghost too? He does that to every tourist. I am planning to send him packing since he's harming my business. Every customer who comes to my place ends up scared because of his stupid warnings.'

'You should do that. But incidentally, I actually spotted a woman … and that too in a white saree. She was asking for a lift and I let her in,' the writer revealed.

'What are the odds? Did she drink your blood?' Vincent joked.

'She asked me not to ask any questions, so I did not. She was silent all the way until the big turn.'

'Yes, near St Michael's, I assume.'

'Yes, yes. The very same, I saw the signboard. She got off there and simply disappeared in the fog.'

'No way!' Vincent exclaimed in shock.

'Why do you seem shocked?'

'Tell me, did that woman have bruises on her face?'

‘Yes. On the left side,’ the writer confirmed.

‘Oh dear Lord!’

‘What happened?’

‘You know St Michael’s is a cemetery and there is only one house in that place. The very house where the maid lived. Where she butchered her husband,’ Vincent said, looking even paler. ‘She is the woman who haunts these hills, the one with bruises on her face. Bruises left by her evil husband.’

A gush of cold wind blew through the open window and extinguished the flames in the chandelier.

Darkness.

Gurgaon Engineering College tried its best to be one of the frontrunners during the mid-2000s, when private colleges started giving out engineering degrees in return for a hefty tuition fee and the occasional gifts. Although it was located on the border of Rajasthan and Haryana, they named it after the millennium city as it would attract flocks of middle-class parents from Gurgaon and Delhi. The first batch was a sell-out with people willing to give a fortune to get their children into the institute.

The college had two main buildings and a lab right behind the second one. The hostel block was still under construction and only the first ten rooms were occupied.

The first building appeared brand new and housed all the four departments: IT, Computer Science, Mechanical and Electrical Engineering. The second building remained unoccupied and it appeared older than the rest, as if it had been standing there for many years, long before the land was even occupied by the college trustees. Its architecture was also different from the outside, and the window frames had a greenish-blue tint, while the new building had bright yellow ones. The entrance was through a glass door and an old watchman was always sitting outside the building, not allowing anyone in.

Arjandev Singh and Ankit Chaudhry were new students from Ambala. However, their trains were delayed because of protests,

and they arrived at Delhi in the evening. From there they took another three hours to reach their college in the outskirts of Gurgaon. At first, they tried to call the watchman, but he was not at the gate. They then pushed it open and entered the college compound. Arjan was a medium-built Sikh teenager who walked with short strides, while Ankit was the typical six-foot Jaat.

'Are you sure this is the place?' Arjan asked looking around.

'Can't you see the board right on top of that building?'

'Oh yes! Glad we made it.'

'I liked the kilometre-long journey from the main road, it's so peaceful here,' Ankit said.

'It's midnight, bro! What else did you expect?' said Arjan in his stiff baritone.

'At least we did not meet any woman in white haunting that road, like the people on the bus had warned us about,' said Ankit.

'Oh that was just bullshit. Every lonely street or road in the world has a woman in white or red or some other colour.'

'So, what do we do now?'

'Well, when I called the college before leaving they told me to report to Ratan Kumar. I'm not sure if he is a peon or member of the faculty, but he was supposed to arrange for our accommodation in the college itself, just for a couple of nights, until the new rooms in the hostel are ready.'

'Oh, okay. But where do we find Ratan Kumar? Can you call him now?'

'Bro, I've been trying but there is no network coverage here.'

'Yeah, I noticed. Let's look around for someone,' Ankit said, looking at his phone.

They walked a little towards the new building and noticed that there was someone sitting in front of the older building. The night was cold and when they arrived in front of the older building, they found that the watchman was fast asleep. A full bottle of desi tharra was lying on the ground near the watchman's right foot. The boys from Ambala noticed a bunch of keys hanging from the aged watchman's pocket, almost ready to fall to the ground. Arjan eyed the keys and carefully removed them from the drunk watchman's pocket.

'Well, we can't sleep outside in the cold,' Arjan explained.

The boys walked to the glass entrance door of the older building. Arjan tried few keys and finally one of them clicked and opened the door. He was about to step inside when Ankit stopped him from behind. Arjan turned around.

‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ asked Ankit.

‘Bro, I think this guy was probably going to show us the room inside this building tonight but passed out while waiting for us. So, we were already supposed to be here tonight. Were you not the one who told me so?’ Arjan reasoned.

‘Yeah, you’re right.’

Arjan and Ankit entered the building and started looking for the lights. Ankit used his phone’s flashlight to search through the darkness. Arjan stumbled upon a switchboard, but despite turning on every switch, no lights came on.

‘No electricity?’ Arjan whispered.

‘Maybe they turned off the main switch.’

‘Perhaps.’

They continued their search through what appeared like the reception area of the building. There was a weird smell of antiseptic that made Ankit sneeze, startling Arjan.

‘Bro! You scared me. Don’t sneeze like that out of the blue.’

‘How else is one to sneeze? It’s the smell of this place. I’m allergic to phenyl,’ Ankit revealed.

‘But there is no smell of phenyl, bro,’ Arjan said.

‘Maybe your nose is blocked.’

‘No bro, my nose is perfectly fine. Maybe you caught a cold while travelling.’

Ankit sniffed the air and said, ‘Maybe you’re right.’

While sneezing, he moved his phone, pointing the flashlight at the ceiling. Ankit corrected the position and the moment the light hit Arjan, Ankit noticed a human figure behind his companion and recoiled in horror.

‘What happened?’ Arjan came running to Ankit and asked.

‘There was someone behind you!’ Ankit said, confused.

Arjan took the phone and then pointed the flashlight towards the wall behind where he was standing and noticed that there was a mirror.

‘You saw my reflection. That’s all!’ Arjan said and laughed.

‘Look!’ Ankit exclaimed with a glimmer of hope, ‘there’s a switchboard near the mirror.’

Arjan opened the switchboard and turned on the mains. The lights flickered on. The interior looked untouched and most of the items in the reception area were covered in dust.

‘Why is this place so dusty? They don’t clean or what?’ Ankit inquired as he rubbed the surface of the reception table with his

finger.

'Let's check upstairs.'

Ankit and Arjan took the stairs that led to a long corridor with rooms on either side. Every room had a white door and a teal curtain. It didn't look anything like an engineering college to them.

'What is this place?' Arjan asked in wonderment.

'Looks like some kind of medical institution.'

'Let's check these rooms. Maybe they have cleaned up one of these rooms for us to stay in.'

'Okay, bro!'

The boys from Ambala anxiously checked the first two rooms and both of them were unkempt. One of them even had dirty linen on the bed. The third room, however, appeared neat and clean. Ankit took the table cloth and used it to whip any remaining dust off the bedsheet and pillow.

'Guess we can sleep here,' Arjan said as he sat on one of the two beds in the room.

'They never told us there was a medical institute in the college complex, did they?' Ankit cross-checked with his friend as he glanced at the table and the drip stand near the bed.

'No, they did not.'

'It feels so strange being here. I wish we had stayed back in Delhi for the night.'

'Look, I'm already pissed off by that woman-in-white story which the bus-wallah told us. I do not want anything else to give me nightmares tonight.'

'Well, on the bright side, there was no woman in white on our way to the college.'

'That doesn't help at all. Can you just switch off the lights and turn on the fan? Let's try to get some sleep.'

'Cool!'

Ankit's finger was just about to touch the switch when the lights went off on their own.

'Thanks, bro!' Arjan said.

'But … But I didn't switch off the lights. They went off on their own.'

'Yeah? Nice try. You are not going to scare me now. I'm sleeping. Goodnight!' said Arjan as he turned the other way and closed his eyes.

Ankit turned on the fan and returned to bed after closing the

door. Anxiety had filled his mind with suspicion.

A few minutes after midnight, Ankit forced his eyes shut, but he wished he could do the same with his ears. The sounds did not let him sleep. Suddenly, he heard a knock on the door. Ankit got up in shock. Arjan was still asleep, unaffected. Ankit used the flashlight on his phone to check the door.

The door was open. He clearly remembered closing and bolting it from inside. The teal curtain waved at the door. Someone passed behind the curtain, as if moving through the hallway. He tightly shut his eyes and tried to calm down. He then heard what sounded like surgical equipment tinkling, and it came from the adjacent room. Ankit took the teal-coloured bedsheet and wrapped it over his body, pressing fingers into his ears. At last, he blocked all sound. That was when he felt something move across his feet. He got up in bed. To his surprise, Arjan was also up and was staring at him.

'Why did you do that?' Arjan asked accusingly.

'What? I didn't, bro. Look…' Ankit pointed towards his feet on which every hair was standing upright.

'Yes, even I have got goose bumps.' Arjan said pointing at his legs.

'I… I saw someone passing by … outside. And bro, somebody has opened the door that I closed and bolted. And most importantly, I did not switch off the lights.'

Ankit and Arjan looked at each other in confusion and then horror. They didn't understand what was going on around them when suddenly, Ankit heard it again.

'Did you hear that?'

'Yes, I guess,' said Arjan.

'Surgical instruments?'

'Could it be the watchman?'

'Maybe we should take a look.'

Arjan and Ankit carefully came out into the hallway. The adjacent room was a biopsy lab. The sounds were coming from within it, and the two boys peeked in through the parted curtain. The strange odour of phenyl was strongest inside the room and there wasn't a soul to be seen—just glass jars placed on racks throughout the room. They walked in and used the flashlight to check the jars.

'What the hell!' Ankit recoiled in horror, 'these are human body parts,' he exclaimed looking at a heart that was floating inside one of the jars.

'It's not phenyl. Its formaldehyde that's been giving off this pungent smell,' Arjan carefully read the label on the jar: 'Gurgaon College of Medicine. Dated 11 September 1997. 001b, Shubham Singh.'

'That thing is five years old?'

'Shubham Singh must be the student who dissected this heart.'

'But there was no mention of a medical college in this compound.'

'Maybe it used to be here before they started the engineering college. Let's check the others,' Arjan said as he started looking at the other jars.

There were more names and dates, and they kept browsing until Ankit noticed something shocking.

'Bro,' Arjan called out, 'you should take a look at this.'

Arjan came running and read the label on the jar that was empty: '13 November 2003…' Ankit turned to Arjan and said, 'That is today.'

'Read the name, bro,' Arjan said.

'113b, Ank…' the voice whimpered, 'Ankit Chaudhry.'

Both of them looked at each other in disbelief.

'Let's get out of this crazy shit place.'

Ankit sprinted towards the door, only to be blocked by a tall dark figure wearing a white lab coat and face-mask, her hands were covered by long, white surgical gloves. A woman in white.

'Where do you think you're going, subject 113b?' she said in an eerie voice. She raised her right hand, in which she was holding a scalpel. She charged at Ankit, who made a dash to the right and ran towards the glass window, sending jars crashing to the floor.

'Come on, quick!' Arjan said, while he kept the window open for his friend.

Ankit could hear the mad chuckles of the woman right behind him and prepared to leap forward, when he tripped over a fallen shelf and onto a broken jar. He cried in pain and the mad woman laughed diabolically. Arjan felt sorry for his friend, but he was also terrified—so he jumped from the window and hit the ground, injuring his knee and elbow.

'What are you doing here? Who are you?' asked the watchman who was woken up by Arjan's fall.

Realizing that there was somebody who could help, Arjan limped towards the watchman and gasped, 'Please… Please, save my friend. He is… He is…' Arjandev Singh looked up at the

window from where he had jumped, and what froze his blood was that the window was closed and sealed by multiple wooden planks from the outside—so that no one could enter or exit it.

'What about your friend?' the watchman asked.

'He… He is… inside.'

'He went inside this building?' the watchman asked in disbelief.

'We both did.'

'That's impossible.'

'No, we took the key from your pocket and went inside. Sorry, we stole it.'

The watchman checked his pockets and then pulled out something and held it in front of Arjan, 'you mean you stole these keys?'

Arjan looked at the keys in horror. Those were the exact same keys that they had stolen few hours ago, but they were safely inside the watchman's pocket.

'Come here,' the watchman said, consoling him, 'I can understand,' he added as he offered his chair to Arjan.

Arjan sat on the chair holding his head.

'Many years ago when this building used to be a medical college, there was a brilliant student. I remember her smile and that glow around her whenever she would come. She was destined to be the topper but then she fell in love with the wrong man who tricked her into a relationship. In her final year, she realized that she was carrying his baby, and when he came to know he waited for everyone to leave for the Diwali vacations. When they were alone, he cut her open and killed the foetus in the lab. She died there too. He replaced the specimens in the jars with her body parts and quietly left the place. He came back after the vacations. I remember because he was the first one to arrive in the morning. He went straight to the lab to check if everything was in order, but he never made it out of there.

'Soon, other boys started disappearing and the story was out. The trustees did everything to keep it all a secret, but eventually they had to close down the medical college. Only five years later, they were able to start your engineering college here, but they decided to seal this building from all sides so that the ghost couldn't lure new victims. But it seems, she is still there, seeking revenge.'

'Was the boy's name Shubham Singh?' Arjan inquired.

'Yes, that was the boy who did this to her. How do you know?'

'Because I saw his heart in one of those jars in the lab!' said

Arjan, his eyes wide with fear.

Inspired by rumours of a haunted mall in Kaushambi

Bhrigu Parashar was afraid of two things.

He always wanted to be a part of the film industry as a cinematographer, but even after spending lakhs on a film-school certification, he ended up with a videographer's job in a virtually non-existent production house in Noida that made two-minute videos for their YouTube channel. He drew a meagre salary and saved most of it so that he could quit and go to Mumbai to find better opportunities. He had developed anxiety due to the growing insecurities about his career, thus ending up on the road was fear number one.

That one day, when he could finally leave for Mumbai after quitting his job, had almost arrived. He had put in his papers and was serving the last day of his notice period. He was supposed to finish off all the remaining projects as part of his handover to the production house. The production house's project manager—who was an IIM-A fellow and had absolutely no knowledge of how the creative industry worked—had called up Bhrigu for a review.

'Bhrigu…' the manager said.

'Yes, sir,' Bhrigu replied. Most artistic people hated the corporate hierarchy that made them answerable to those who hadn't a creative bone in their bodies. That was the case with poor Bhrigu,

but thankfully it was his last day at the office. 'Sir, I have wrapped up all the recent projects.'

'Yes, but there is still one that needs final touch-ups.'

'What?'

'They need your help painting it.'

'Painting?' Bhrigu asked, confused. Then he realized what the manager was trying to say, 'Oh, you mean grading, sir?'

'Yeah, whatever. This is that music video you shot last Navratri. Can you please finish it by EOD?'

'But, sir…'

'Come on, Bhrigu… Would you like me to give you a bad recommendation for your next job?' blackmailed the manager, unaware that Bhrigu would never want future employers to know that he had ever worked at that place.

'No, sir,' lied Bhrigu, realizing his month's salary was still to be credited.

'Good, then please go to the editor's office and get it done.'

Bhrigu left for the editor's studio in Kaushambi. The office was located in an almost defunct mall in the region. Throughout the journey, he had butterflies about it being the last job for the production house. After getting off the bus, he had to take a share-auto to the mall. The moment he got off the auto in front of the mall, which was located on the highway, the auto driver gave him a sympathetic look.

'What happened, Bhaiyya?' Bhrigu asked.

'No, just wondering who would ever go to this evil place,' the driver remarked. 'Good luck!' he said and then started his three-wheeler and left.

Bhrigu did not realize that the driver was referring to rumours about the place being haunted. The studio was on the fourth floor of the building, and when he entered the deserted mall, he realized that all the fire exits were locked, so he had to take the elevator. That was his second fear—claustrophobia.

Bhrigu could not even imagine spending a second inside a closed elevator, especially the steel ones. He waited for fifteen minutes for someone to join him in the elevator, but nobody else seemed to be waiting for a ride up. He didn't have a phone number for anyone from the studio, so he finally decided to go in.

He pressed the button outside the elevator. Ding! The rusty door opened. He looked at the steel walls that made up all three sides of the elevator. He saw his own reflection on it, but then—another reflection. He felt relieved at the thought of company, so

he turned around but there was no one there. Disappointed, he got in. He pressed the button marked '4', and then waited for the door to close and when it did, the elevator jerked. Immediately, he felt trapped, breathless as his heart beat faster, sending beads of sweat down his skin.

He was worried about suffocating there if he got stuck. Just then, the lift stopped with a thump at the first floor. However, to his comfort, the door opened, and a pot-bellied man with white hair wearing a security guard's uniform entered the elevator. The security guard smiled and then pressed the button for the fifth floor. The door closed with a jerk like before. The chamber was filled with the irritating scent of pan masala, which made it even harder for Bhrigu to breathe. He was sweating like a pig.

'Sir, are you okay?' the guard asked in a Bhojpuri accent.

'Yeah… yeah. I just get nervous inside lifts.'

He smiled at Bhrigu. 'Sir, don't worry, this elevator will not break down. But you should have been here when it got stuck five years ago. A man was trapped inside.'

Bhrigu's heart jumped upon hearing about the incident, but the guard didn't seem to be bothered. He continued narrating it in detail.

'Poor man, he suffocated in there and, when the elevator was opened after three hours, he was found dead. Ever since then, the guards have been very particular and I, personally make sure that I accompany those who take the elevator. So, don't you worry, sir.' The guard smiled again.

'Thank you for the assurance,' Bhrigu said anxiously.

'I am glad you said so. Usually, these ungrateful people don't even notice me.'

The elevator came to a sudden halt, this time, displacing Bhrigu from his position. He was afraid but then he heard the ding sound again and the door opened. Bhrigu walked out of the elevator without looking back, desperate for fresh air. By the time he reached the entrance of the office, the elevator had closed and gone to its next destination.

An hour later, Bhrigu came out of the studio with the editor after finishing the grading of the last video clip.

'Wait, I'll come with you. I need a sutta,' the editor called from behind as Bhrigu was about to reach the elevator.

'Sure, let's go,' Bhrigu said pointing towards the elevator.

'No dude, we have to take the stairs.'

'Stairs? But all the staircases were locked.'

'Yes, we have the key,' the editor said, holding up a key.

'Are you claustrophobic too?' Bhrigu asked.

'Not at all.'

'Then why the stairs?'

'Because you can't use the elevator. It's been out of power for past five years, man,' said the editor.

'What are you saying? I just…'

'One of the security guards died inside it, and since then it's been unused. Nobody uses it and it is not functional anymore.'

The editor went and pressed the buttons outside the elevator door and nothing happened.

Bhrigu's heart almost stopped beating for a moment and he looked at the elevator in horror, for he realized that he had come face to face with a ghost. The ghost of the kind watchman who had died in the elevator five years ago. Bhrigu Parashar had been inside a dysfunctional elevator with a ghost!

'I am glad you said so. Usually, these ungrateful people don't even notice me,' the words of the ghost echoed in Bhrigu's head.

A haunted house in Hyderabad

Batsa did not like to be ordered around, but that was exactly how Lakshmana Reddy treated him. The twenty-nine-year-old driver, who was a native of Kathmandu, just wanted to get out of there. Sadly, it was not as easy as it seemed because his employer owed him his salary from the very day he joined. Batsa had come to Hyderabad three months ago and since then he had been trapped in the miser's tentacles. His sisters and brother back home depended on Batsa for their everyday bread and butter, so, the poor driver could not even think of leaving without the money. He wished his scrooge-like boss would die of heart attack, then he could steal all the money from his house. But then, such wishes never came true.

One night, when the moon was full, Lakshmana Reddy was out on his routine walk after dinner. Batsa was forced to accompany the pot-bellied, white-bearded man every night, as the old man was afraid of stray dogs—they always barked at him. That night was no different from the others. Dogs barked at him as he walked along the empty street.

'I don't know why these stupid creatures hate me so much, I'm such a sweet man. Don't you think, Batsa?' Mr Reddy turned towards his driver.

Batsa replied in a tone that was filled with sarcasm, 'You are the sweetest!'

'I'm glad you think so… but that is not getting you a bonus.' The man clarified.

'First pay off my salary, you miserly old creep!' The driver murmured in hushed tones.

'Did you say something?' the pot-bellied man asked.

'No, sir. I did not. It's very cold tonight.'

Lakshmana Reddy did not respond to that as he noticed some movement outside the corner house of the colony. A car waited outside as the man of the house stormed out of the gate in anger. He had two big bags that he dumped in the trunk of the car and before they knew it, the man sat in the car and it drove away.

'Strange… He never told me that he was going away. His wife and daughters must be home,' Mr Reddy said looking at the car that took a turn and disappeared from sight. Mr Reddy said, 'I heard that he recently lost his job. But he is still one rich son of a bitch.'

'Really?' Batsa's eyes gleamed with greed.

'Of course, he comes from a family of Jammis (landlords) and he is in the public works department. He takes big fat bribes to move files, you know. I've heard that he keeps all his bribe money in a safe inside the house.'

'Then they must be rich! But where is he going?'

'I don't know. Vimala might know. My wife has all the latest neighbourhood gossip,' Mr Reddy claimed. 'I will ask her.'

As the two men walked towards the front of the house, the driver got a good look at it. It was lit from outside with red-tinted lights. He saw the silhouette of a woman along with two girls standing on either side of her, they did not seem to move at all. Batsa looked away as he felt uncomfortable. Some plans were bubbling in his mind and he needed to stay out of suspicion. So, he quietly walked with Mr Reddy and arrived at his home in fifteen minutes without mentioning anything about the family. Later, Batsa was busy planning his first move. He had to get to the hardware shop in town to purchase some lockpicking tools.

The following night, while the Reddy's were having brunch, Batsa overheard their conversation through an open window.

'I did not know,' said Mrs Vimala Reddy in her shrill voice, 'That he was going somewhere, leaving the girls home.' She paused to eat and said, 'But then those people have always been weird.'

'Amazing! I wonder if the man will be gone for long,'

Lakshmana Reddy said as he munched on the rice and chicken curry.

'Why do you care? You should only worry about your wife and kids. Stop taking interest in other women. I'm sure that the lady of that house is some sort of a witch who lures men and gets them to do her bidding.'

'Is that so?'

'Haven't you seen how Teresa's husband ended up picking up and dropping off the girls every day in his car? He was like an unpaid driver for the girls. He did not even bother to take his own wife to the hospital just because he had to pick up the girls from college. I am telling you, that woman … she does some black magic or something like that. Stay away from her and her girls. They are vicious creatures.'

'Oh, come on! Don't be superstitious, dear.'

'Am I? Do you know, few nights ago, on Diwali, when every other house in the country was lit up with lamps, that one house in Kudanbaag colony was completely dark. Not even a single lamp was lit and all windows were shut, as if somebody had died inside. Who does such a thing on the darkest night of the month of Karthika?'

'I… I…'

'Witches! My grandmother used to tell me that witches would shut all windows and doors on Diwali night so that the Goddess wouldn't enter their houses.' She paused for a moment and then said, 'Witches… All of them witches!'

Outside the house, Batsa was more confident about his plan. All he needed was to make sure that the house did not have any dogs. He was ready to break in and rob the place, for, he was sure that he would find money or valuable items there.

A few minutes after midnight, Batsa arrived at the wall on the eastern side of the house. He had applied bike grease all over his body, a trick he learned from a burglar a long time ago. If someone caught hold of him during the act, he would be able to slip out of their grasp. However, it was also making it difficult for him to climb the walls and the smell was killing him. Still, he was ready to sacrifice it all for the money. He had tied a rope around his hip and with it, an old flashlight. He did not intend to use it though. Before entering the house, he stopped, closed his eyes and prayed to Lord Bhairava.

'Hey Bhairava, help me find something of value which will get me out of this rotting life at that pathetic miser Reddy's place. Please…'

He opened his eyes after praying, but saw something move in front of him, near the door. He quickly hid behind a bush. He tried looking again but realized that it was the shadow of a tree outside the house, which was swaying in the wind. He let out a sigh of relief and started towards the door at the back of the house. As far as he could guess from the common architecture of the houses in the colony, it would open to the kitchen. He had come with a small but strong lockpick. He inserted the thing into the lock and started moving it carefully. And then he heard a giggle behind him. He stopped and turned around nervously. There was no one, but he noticed something move on the branch of the very tree that had given Batsa a fright just moments ago. An owl was looking at him, and then it made the giggle-like sound again. Relieved, the man got back to his mission once again. He twirled the pick and the door unlocked. He pushed it open slowly and stepped in without making any noise at all. He passed through several rooms looking out for one which had a wardrobe or cupboard that may contain the safe. He finally stumbled upon the master bedroom, and inside he found a wardrobe with a safe. Once again, he used the lockpick and unlocked the safe. There were things inside, and he hoped it was jewellery. The things jingled like metal against the steel walls of the safe. He hoped that the items inside were gold rings with diamonds or precious stones. He put his right hand inside and pulled them all out. They were not metallic and definitely did not feel like rings, so he switched on his torch and shined its light on his palm to check. What he saw made him gag with horror and disgust. The things were bloodstained teeth, plucked from someone's mouth. Some even had cavities intact.

He kept the teeth back in the safe. That was when the light from the torch illuminated the other contents inside the wardrobe: women's hair flowing down from clothes hangers, nails sealed in plastic containers, sliced ears and even eyeballs.

'We worked very hard to collect those,' a woman's voice said from behind him.

Batsa's heart skipped a beat. He immediately ran without looking back. He was sure that if the two girls, half his height, tried to stop him, he would slip through their hands due to the grease gelled over his body. But as he ran, he slipped because of the grease. With effort, he was able to get out and then jump over the wall and onto the street.

He landed at the feet of Mr Reddy.

'Thief!' Mr Reddy screamed to alert everyone.

‘Sir… sorry… sorry…’ cried Batsa.

Mr Reddy identified the voice.

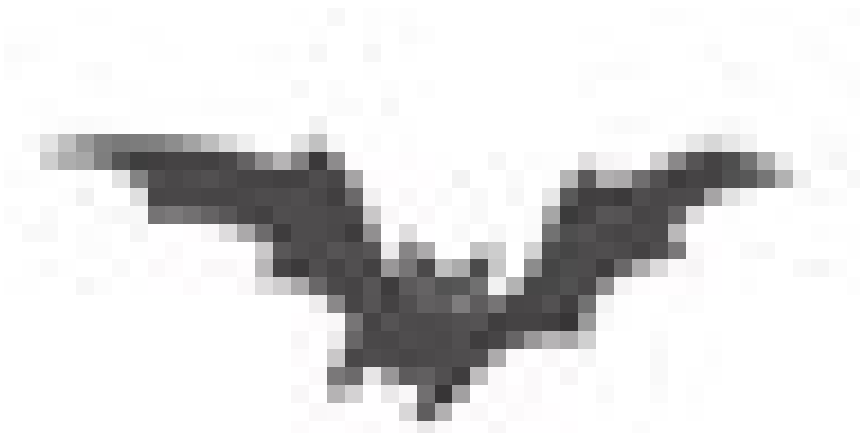
‘Batsa?’ Mr Reddy asked in shock, ‘What the hell were you doing? How can we ever trust you?’ he said. ‘I have to call the police.’

‘But I did not steal anything.’

‘Then why did you go there? To pay a visit to the woman and her girls?’ Reddy asked angrily as he dialled 100 on his cell phone.

‘I wanted to take something but something weird happened. I must tell you… those people are not normal. There are… there are.. ‘

Before Batsa could explain, Reddy interrupted, ‘You can explain it all to the police.’



A few minutes later

When the police arrived, the inspector immediately detained Batsa.

‘I am telling you, this man has been working for me but if I knew he was a thief, I would have never have hired him,’ Reddy said to the policeman.

‘Sir, you can arrest me and do whatever you want. But please come with me once. There are things that I want to show you that will shock you. The people in that house are not normal,’ Batsa requested with tears in his eyes. ‘I swear on Lord Bhairav, please

come once.'

'I cannot simply go and raid a house without a warrant,' the inspector said, 'but I will talk to the owners about your burglary attempt.'

The inspector went and knocked on the door, but nobody answered. The doorbells were also falling on deaf ears. Inspector suspected foul play at the hands of Batsa, so, he got the door unlocked and entered. Upon inspecting, they found the house empty.

'There is no one in the house,' the Inspector said.

'I swear, I saw the woman and her girls. They almost grabbed me while I was running out,' Batsa explained.

'Is that so? Then where are they? Look around!' The inspector said, wiping dust off the coffee table in the living room. 'This house seems to have been left uninhabited for weeks, or maybe months.'

'Okay, then please come with me, sir. I will show you what I saw. It was weird,' Batsa said as he started walking towards the master bedroom. He arrived in front of the wardrobe and then said, 'Please open it and see for yourself.'

The inspector opened the wardrobe and then stood there, shocked. For in front of him was a wooden wardrobe with three racks, and each rack was stuffed with one rotting female corpse.

Batsa was arrested. His claims of having seen women and human parts fell on deaf ears. Some of the neighbours testified about the strange rumours associated with the people living in that house. A couple of women even accused them of being witches. But the police needed solid proof about what had happened that night. However, later when the post mortem report arrived, Batsa was let go.

According to the forensic reports, the women had been dead for more than six months while Batsa had been in Hyderabad for only three. The moment he was released, he went back to his hometown and never returned.

Who killed the women? Where did the husband go? Nobody knows. To this day, the mystery remains unsolved.

February 1907

The heard a scream but they were asked to ignore it. After that, they heard it again a number of times that night. But they did not dare go inside. The screams kept getting louder.

Fifty Years Ago

Ross Island was one of the three islands chosen by the British to construct a penal colony for those who participated in the Indian mutiny. 300 political prisoners were brought to the island for the first time from Calcutta in 1858. The convicts were made to clear off the forest and build settlements for their British oppressors. More than half of the prisoners died of malaria and other diseases. History has not recorded many of the atrocities that the British inflicted upon the Indian prisoners—the freedom fighters—but there are stories that the colonial masters would have preferred to keep to themselves.

One such story was that of Om Prakash Mishra, a thirty-five-

year-old sepoy from Cawnpore (now Kanpur) who turned rogue at the last moment. Mishra was an average-looking man at just about five feet, six inches. He had a slightly protruding belly and peculiar eyes—small, round and black as coal. He was regarded as a British loyalist and therefore the Indian prisoners did not like him at all. They found him selfish and mysterious as he preferred to keep to himself. The British were already building a settlement for themselves with bazaars and palatial cottages. Mishra waited patiently, for he had a grand plan. Ten years passed, and the man from Cawnpore had won the confidence of his British 'masters'. It was decided that the 'reformed' prisoner would be transferred back to India: a dream for any convict who was brought to that disgusting little island.

It was time to execute his plan. He knew that none of his Indian mates had any chance of returning to the Indian subcontinent and that they were all doomed to die there. So, he got out one night to set fire to the entire establishment. Revenge was his motive: to burn all the British bastards who had captured them. However, he was caught right outside the patio by a policeman. The British sent him to the solitary chamber in the southern part of the island, a place which was isolated from the rest of the world.

He was tortured for the next seventeen days and sixteen nights. The merciless guards would put a burning spoon into the poor man's eyes and enjoy his screams. His eyes were plucked out, and ears punctured with long needles. Since he refused to eat, they would pump his own faecal matter down his throat using sheer force. Mishra died of hunger, pain and extensive bleeding.

Soon after his death, those guarding his solitary cell reported screams of the dead prisoner. Someone even saw the ghost of Mishra, and they reported to the jailer that the apparition had glowing eyes. The apparition was seen on several occasions and prisoners claimed they had been attacked by a man with glowing eyes. Initially, the jailer did not believe it but when one of the guards ended up jumping into the sea in a frenzied state, they closed down the solitary cell.

Many years passed and the British went on to build the Viper jail, followed by the notorious Cellular jail. Eventually, the British would vacate this sorry piece of land. However, the solitary chamber was left untouched since 1870. Nobody dared go near the place after sunset and some could still hear screams from within the chamber.

Murarilal, a convict from Mathura, caught one of the jailers misbehaving with Jamna, the sweeper. Murari was weeding the garden outside the protestant church when he heard the protests of the poor Indian woman. He swung the spade and knocked down the policeman from Wales, while he was trying to force himself upon the woman. The jailer sent Murari to solitary confinement, against the orders of his senior. He himself stood guard outside the chamber so that nobody could let the convict out.

Murari was already beaten up by the prison guards and he lay with numb limbs in a corner of the chamber, resting his back against the stone-cold walls. Blood oozed out of his rectum and he could not afford to get to his feet. Stone walls could cause hallucinations if there was no ventilation for carbon dioxide to escape. So, few rationalists from the British services also believed that the ghost or apparition of Mishra, could actually be some hallucination experienced by the witnesses. However, most of the guards who witnessed the haunting never stepped inside the stone structure. They had seen the apparition with glowing eyes from the outside.

Murari was no rationalist and he was aware of the hauntings. However, he did not know if he wanted to pray for safety from the ghost or for relief from the pain. He was sure that he would not survive the night if the bleeding did not stop.

Outside, the Welsh jailer smoked his pipe and exhaled proud fumes of tobacco into the cold night air. He locked the woman's husband up and threatened to never release him. The poor woman had to surrender to the white man. While he was raping the desperate woman, they heard a scream from inside. It was Murari's voice, and he was crying for help. The jailer ignored it.

Something inhuman was standing in front of Murari. It was the ghost of Mishra.

'Please, do not harm me,' Murari whimpered as he tried his best to lift his leg with his two broken hands, 'If you should be doing anything, then it should be teaching that white rascal a lesson for his evil deeds.'

The aura of the ghost invaded the corner where Murari was lying. The requests of the poor prisoner were falling on deaf ears. Inside the unlit stone chamber, Murari finally saw the glowing eyes of the ghost, and soon, nothing else was visible.

‘I will relieve you of your mortal pains because there is not much life left in you,’ said the ghost.

Murari kept screaming through the night as if being attacked by the ghost. Just before sunrise, the screams stopped and the silence of the night took over for a few moments before the morning birds began chirping. When the sun had finally risen, the Welsh jailer got up. He noticed that the door was open.

‘Wake up you dirty piece of meat,’ he said, slapping the woman’s face. ‘Get out of here before I change my mind and push you into the sea.’

The woman got up, gathered her clothes and walked away.

The Welsh jailer was a little worried because he had locked the door from outside, and now it was open. He wondered if the Indian woman had let the inmate out while the jailer was asleep.

Nervously, he went in and saw Murari curled up in the corner of the room. It seemed like he was sleeping. The jailer kicked Murari on the back and turned him over with his foot. What he saw sent a chill down his spine. Murari was dead and there were hand prints on his neck. His eyes had been plucked out. The jailer started walking backwards in horror but suddenly he heard the door slam. Someone locked it from the outside.

The screams of the jailer were heard for the next four weeks. Nobody could open the door as it was jammed. Finally, the chamber had to be burnt down by the British authorities and startlingly, not a single dead body was found inside it afterwards. Some people believed that the woman had helped Murari escape and they replaced him with someone else’s body before locking the door behind the jailer. As the story started gaining popularity among the Indian convicts, the British decided to burn down the place so that the rumour was also reduced to ashes. The note about the chamber was erased from all history books and the story about the ghost with glowing eyes remained a rumour in the unseen pages of the Indian struggle of independence.

Seventy years after independence, the island is a deserted shadow of what it once was. The buildings have been vacant for more than eight decades, and nature has taken over man-made stone structures. However, the cries and screams of the tormented men and women still echo throughout the island.

Based on events recounted by a friend from Chennai

Luv and Kush Subramaniam were born and brought up in Chennai. Luv was five minutes older than his twin brother and therefore considered himself superior in all aspects. Kush, on the other hand, was a carefree happy-go-lucky guy. He did not bother about anything in this world as long as his stomach was full. Luv was in final year of engineering and Kush was content to roam around with his DSLR camera after receiving a degree in English literature.

On the night of Halloween in 2017, Luv and Kush were invited to a party by their old friend Anthony.

They arrived at a quaint villa on Besant Road, which belonged to Anthony's cousin, Peter. He was a dark and short man, roughly the same age as Anthony. Luv noticed that Peter seemed to have a lazy eye, but other than that, he was a regular guy.

'This is a nice place. Very calm and inspiring,' Kush said.

'Well, this is Peter's house. He was not letting us stay here for the night. You have no idea how hard it was to persuade this guy to let us have a Halloween party here,' Anthony revealed patting on Peter's back.

'Halloween, eh?' Luv said. 'Seems like you've embraced the

American lifestyle. How long have you been living in New York?'

'Five years, and yes, Halloween parties are fun. This year I was really sad that I would be missing it back at university because I had to come down to Chennai for my cousin's wedding. But, hey, who cares? We'll have a good time here, for sure,' Anthony said raising his glass of whiskey.

'What do they do there on Halloween?' Kush asked.

'Kids go trick-or-treating, adults throw parties, tell stories in costume… Most just drink and party, ' Anthony answered, winking at his cousin who was silently listening in.

'Stories? You mean, like horror stories?' asked Kush.

'Yes, but true stories.'

'Interesting. How about I tell you guys a horror story?' Kush offered.

'Cool, go on.' All of them got ready for an exciting story.

'You know, there is this hotel in Ooty called Finn Hill, where a film crew was once staying during a shoot,' Kush narrated. 'On the third night, the choreographer…' He paused and clarified, 'you know, the dance master…'

'We know what a choreographer is, idiot,' Luv said.

Kush continued, 'So, at night, the choreographer was trying to sleep in her room, which was completely made of wood. At around midnight, she started feeling claustrophobic in her sleep. She woke up. She started hearing sounds of the furniture being moved in the room above her. She waited for fifteen minutes for the noise to stop, but it did not. Finally, she called the reception and complained about the floor above her room. This is where it gets interesting.' Kush leaned forward. 'The manager informed her that there was no floor above her room.'

Kush stopped and waited for the audience's reaction.

'Nice one,' Anthony said.

'Bullshit. Do you call that horror?' Luv asked.

'Well, it had a twist.'

'So?'

'Well, if it were a film, I could have given you a taste of horror with the visual setup and sound effects. But sadly, I'm only narrating. The element of horror in literature is primarily defined by a chilling twist in the end,' he argued.

'Whatever, dude. The story sucked.'

'Oh yeah? Then why don't you try telling us a horror story—with visual and sound effects?'

'Knock it off, guys,' the cousin intervened. 'Now, I would like to tell you about something that really happened to me.' He paused to look at Kush, 'I'm sorry but I'm not an expert in literature like you, so, please forgive me if I do not narrate it right.'

Everyone agreed to listen to his story.

'Two weeks ago,' he started, 'a Hindu tantric knocked on my door at midnight. When I opened it, I saw that he was sweating in the cold night, and was panting as if he had been chased by a dog or something. He was holding a small brass chalice with a lid. He held it out in front of me and asked me to keep it safe until dawn. He promised to return for it. But before he left, he warned me not to read what was engraved on the outer side of the lid, at any cost.'

Luv noticed that Peter was not drinking.

'The tantric left. I closed the door and went back in with the chalice. I placed it on the shelf and then went to bed. However, I could not sleep at all. I kept hearing sounds of thunder and wolves howling. I must tell you guys, that I am extremely afraid of both thunder and wolves. Minutes before that, when I had opened the door, the weather was pleasant. So, I got up and checked from my window.

'I was surprised because there was no rain or thunder at all. It was not even windy. I started wondering if the chalice had something to do with it. I went to the shelf I had placed it on. It was that shelf, over there.' Peter pointed to the wooden shelf in the corner of the room. 'That was where I had placed the chalice. I noticed that it was vibrating.'

Luv, Kush and Anthony looked at the shelf where the object had once been.

'I picked up the chalice, and felt the vibrations rattle through me. I checked the lid and there was something written on top of it. Some words were engraved in Tamil. As far as I could tell, it was nothing like the Tamil you and I read these days. It was probably old Tamil. Blame it on my fate or carelessness, but I read what was written.'

'What happened then?' Luv asked.

'I fainted. I had some terrible nightmares when I was unconscious. When I woke up, it was morning and the furniture was scattered all over. It looked like the place had been burgled. There were muddy footprints all over the floor, the walls, and even the ceiling. I was scared to death. I looked for the tantric everywhere but could not find him. I asked around but found no information about him. My eyes began twitching every five minutes and it was making it difficult for me to see or concentrate

on anything else. I got the house cleaned by a maid who charged me double because she had to wipe the ceiling and walls as well. And then, that night again, I had more nightmares. When I woke in the morning, the footprints were back, but this time, with traces of blood. Soon after, I noticed deep cuts on the soles of my feet.' Peter said revealing the congealed cut-marks under his feet.

'My friend, are those from stepping on broken glass?' Luv inquired touching the narrator's feet.

'I do not know. I was scared and thus, decided to visit our pastor. He blessed me with holy water and promised to come home for an inspection.'

'What did he find?' Anthony asked with a little giggle.

'I know you are not a church-goer, Anthony. Your mother has been complaining about it since you were a teenager. But I would request you not to make fun of others' beliefs,' Peter looked at Luv and Kush, 'Right guys?'

'Yes. Be a little sensitive, man!' Luv winked at Anthony and then turned to Peter, 'Please continue.'

'The pastor is an old French-Indian. He told me that the house has been possessed by a powerful and evil spirit that has recently escaped its prison. I told him about the chalice and the tantric. The pastor asked me to bury the chalice outside the house and keep it there until the tantric returns for it. He blessed the house with holy water and we prayed together. There were no disturbances or footprints after that. However, I kept seeing the Tantric at my door in my nightmares. Sometimes, he would appear headless, and sometimes he would cry and beg for the chalice. But he never really appeared at the door. I have been waiting for him to come for the chalice.' Peter let out a heavy breath.

'That's it?' Luv asked.

'Yes.'

'But there was no proper ending to the story,' Luv complained.

'I'm sorry. I told you I'm not a storyteller. But that's what's been happening over the last two weeks, while I was living in this house. If that gives you some chills…'

'Good attempt, but your story is obviously fake.' Luv chuckled.

'Reminds me of E.V Lucas's Face on the Wall. Come on, admit that you made it all up in the last fifteen minutes,' Kush said.

'No, no… You have to trust me. It really happened, that's why I did not encourage Anthony staying here overnight.'

'Right. When is this tantric of yours coming back for the

chalice? Maybe he can join us. He won't even need a Halloween costume,' Anthony said and broke into a loud laugh.

The three friends laughed at the poor attempt by the house owner to scare the friends. They poured more drinks into their glasses and raised a toast: 'To Peter and the Tantric!'

'Go ahead. Laugh! But only I know the sleepless nights I have been having for the past two weeks.'

'But you said you were sleeping and having nightmares.'

'Yes, nightmares that wake me up in the middle of the night. And then I hear the doorbell and when I open the door there is no one standing outside,' Peter uttered as he looked at the clock which was just ten seconds from midnight.

He counted down until finally, the clock struck twelve. Then the doorbell rang.

All three friends stopped their drinking and looked at each other. Peter's eyes began to twitch and squint. He got up like a hypnotized robot. Anthony also got to his feet.

'I'll answer the door,' Anthony offered and walked towards the door.

Thunder rumbled outside, and an explosion was heard from a nearby transformer. The lights went off. Kush quickly turned on the flashlight on his phone when they heard knocks on the wooden door. The sound raised the hair on Anthony's hand. Luv and Kush had goosebumps. Peter just stood there like a robot. Anthony unbolted and opened the door. Another bolt of lightning lit up the sky, silhouetting the man at the door against its flash.

'What have you done?' the stranger growled. 'I had warned you.'

Anthony trembled a little. Kush quickly shined the torch at the door and the face of the man was revealed.

'How many times have I told you not to park your car in front of my gate?' the man said.

Anthony realized it was just Peter's neighbour.

'Oh!' Anthony said in relief, 'I am so sorry, sir. It's my car. I'm Peter's cousin, and I really did not know where to park.'

'Just get it out of there and park it in Peter's compound,' the neighbour said angrily and left.

Anthony shut the door and went to move the car. Kush and Luv were relieved until they noticed that Perter was still shaken. They were trying to calm him down when Anthony returned.

'Guys, I need your help,' Anthony said.

'What happened?' asked Kush.

‘The car won’t start. I will need you to push it for me for now. Tomorrow we can get it fixed.’

‘Sure.’

Luv and Kush followed Anthony to the car. Anthony got into the driver’s seat as the twins pushed the car from behind. They parked it right outside Peter’s gate. While coming out of the car, Anthony tripped over a small stump and fell flat on his face. The twins helped him up. Anthony’s nose was bleeding a little.

‘Who the hell would leave a stump here?’ Anthony yelled with pain.

‘Maybe it is a reminder for something?’ Kush guessed.

‘You mean, like a marker for where he buried the chalice?’ Luv said sarcastically.

‘Very funny!’

The three friends went back in the house. Peter was not in the living room where they had left him. At first, they thought he must have gone to the bathroom but when he did not return, they decided to look for him inside the house. Anthony checked in the bedrooms, Luv checked the bathrooms.

‘Guys, come over here…’ shouted Kush from the living room.

Anthony and Luv came running to the living room with their cell phone flashlights on. Kush’s eyes were horror-stricken as he pointed his phone’s light at the floor and ran it over the wall: there were bloody handprints and footprints that ran up to the ceiling and ended at the top shelf. Luv and Anthony’s hearts skipped a beat when they saw Peter, covered in blood, sitting on the shelf

with a piece of raw meat in his hands…

'Look at what's on the floor,' Kush said as he lowered the beam of light.

There, on the floor, lay the neighbour's mutilated corpse.

The Deity and the Drunkard of Kasaragod

The Kasaragod district in Kerala carries more of the folk traditions of South Canara (Kannada) than the land of Kerala. The language, the customs, the festivities, the food habits and even the political ideology of the district is completely different from the rest of the state. The region is quite famous for the bhuta cult. The inclusive nature of these cult systems is what integrated different castes in the name of nationalism. The worship of Vedic Gods along with bhuta, or local spirits, was unique to the region.

Every household had its own bhuta in the puja room, and every village had its own spirit. These spirits are believed to influence the lives of their devotees through a more intimate relationship. They have certain fixed spheres of influence and are believed to protect the villagers, talk to them and warn them as and when necessary. What makes this more interesting are those who invoke these spirits within themselves in a traditional dance form called Bhuta Kola. These clerics mostly come from a particular community and once they adorn the dress of the bhuta, they go into a trance, wherein they become one with the spirit.

Ever since his business bombed, Jagan took to drinking and would always end up cursing the bhutas, especially during live Bhuta Kola performances.

Once this happened during the annual festivities at the Chunoor temple. It was eleven in the night and the one dressed up as Panjurli Bhuta was entering a trance and dancing to the beats of the chenda (local drum form). He stomped on the burning coal that lay before him and started dancing when, from the crowd, a drunk Jagan shouted, 'Look at this mad man fake this crap…' He drew all the attention towards himself. The bhuta impersonator lifted his arm in an aggressive stance, pointing towards Jagan as the people who had gathered around glared at the drunkard.

Jagan didn't stop there. 'What are you pointing at? Do you want to take me on? Come, I will strangle you till you stop pretending to be a deity!' Jagan yelled and started towards the Kola. One of Jagan's old friends rushed in and dragged him away from the crowd. Jagan kept swearing and eventually passed out. The old friend took him home to Chunoor and dropped the drunkard on the living room floor.

The weather was quite cold on January nights, and the chill crept through the mattress on which Jagan lay. He tossed and turned in his sleep. Soon, the cold melted into a warmth, and Jagan felt comfortable. A few seconds later, he felt his skin brush against the mattress, and he opened his eyes to see that he was lying on a layer of blazing coal. Jagan jumped off the burning floor, only to land against a towering figure. The impact cracked some of his bones. The thing was about seven-feet high and seemed to weigh a lot more than an average human. It had the body of a male, with long nails and hairy chest, but it was the face that sent chills down the spine of the drunkard. It had the face of a wild boar and it was fuming. It was the Panjurli Bhuta—the deity with a boar's head.

Jagan cried for help but couldn't produce a sound with his broken ribs. He wished he had not been so arrogant. He wanted to beg for forgiveness but his voice would not come out at all, even the tears vaporized due to the heat of the coal. He could feel his skin burn and blister. The fire from the coal was spreading throughout the house. The boar-headed bhuta, strangled Jagan and its nails pierced Jagan's flesh as he bled. Jagan's body could not bear the torture anymore and finally he gave up.

The next morning, people had lined up in front of Jagan's house, which had burned down. Nobody ever found out how the house had caught fire. Everybody thought that the mad drunkard must have set his own house on fire and then burnt himself alive. Some people even started talking about how Jagan had offended the deity at the temple.

Meanwhile, the priest of the Chunoor temple, after performing the rituals of the main deity, went to the small chamber of the Panjurli Bhuta. When the priest unlocked and opened the door, he was startled to find an unconscious Jagan inside, with injury marks on his throat, as if something had torn into his neck. It was shocking that the door was locked from outside and nobody but the priest had the key. Jagan's friend had stated that the drunkard was brought home the previous night. How and when Jagan got inside the chamber would remain a mystery.

Two days later, Jagan regained consciousness. He confessed to having seen the bhuta in his dream, and said it had given him a second chance to mend his ways. From that day on, Jagan remained devoted to the deity and even to this day people of the region talk about Jagan's arrogance and his tryst with the bhuta.

December 13, 1929

It was gloomy afternoon and the sun did not show any mercy on the tanned Englishman. After walking over the hilly terrain for a little longer than twenty minutes, Richard found a small tea stall. There was one more customer present at that time, and his face betrayed hunger.

The owner of the tea stall, a man of Pahari origin, welcomed Richard with a wide grin. He muttered something in the local language. He could not understand what they meant for he had no knowledge of the Pahari language. Some words were vaguely similar to Hindi. Having spent quite some time in Delhi, Richard now spoke Hindi quite well.

'Chai?' The man asked.

'Yes, please.' The word was the same in Hindi and he could surely use some tea to strike a conversation with the local.

'Where are you from?' The man asked with the same wide grin.

The other customer was eagerly waiting for Richard's reply as well. He smiled at him, exposing his bright white teeth. Richard returned his smile.

'I… I do not understand. Kya bole tum?' Richard tried asking in

Hindi, hoping that the local would understand.

'You…' He said pointing at Richard's chest, 'England?'

'Oh, yes. I am,' Richard replied instantly.

'You hurt India? We Simon-go-back you.' The tea-seller chuckled. Beneath the chuckles lay a reminder of what they would do in case the white man tried to throw his weight around.

'No, no! I want to buy that mansion, up there on the hill,' Richard declared pointing his walking cane towards the picturesque sight: a beautiful house made of wood, lurking just beyond the leaves of the spruce trees about a hundred metres above them.

Suddenly, an expression of pity and fear spread on the tea-seller's face.

'Woh bhootiya jagah hai. Buy no-no!' he said.

'Yes-yes. I want to buy it.' The Englishman spoke without recognizing any word other than 'buy'.

'Bhooth, preth in house!' He tried to make the white man understand.

'Yes, the house. Who is the owner?'

'Owner?'

'Yes, the owner. Where can I find him?'

'Owner dead.' The tea-seller loosened the woollen muffler around his neck, 'Go back. No come!' The tea-seller said with a grim expression.

He moved towards the Englishman who was putting his hat back on, preparing to leave. He warned him, in the local language, 'Beware!'

However, the Englishman did not pay heed to the tea-seller and left for the house. According to the two eye-witnesses, he went uphill but never came down. Nobody knew what happened to him up there at that house, which many believed was haunted by a poltergeist, or as the locals call it, a pishaach.

December 13, 2016

'Friends, I'm here at the famous Charleville Mansion in Shimla, and tonight I'm going to stay here and complete the 100th video for my channel Night at a Haunted House. I did not get permission to stay here from the authorities, and had to actually sneak in through the backdoor. Nobody knows I'm here, so please make sure to share, comment and like this video,' announced the self-proclaimed paranormal investigator, Gaurav Sharma, to his iPhone's front camera. 'Tonight I will prove to you guys that this mansion's haunting is also a myth!

'People here say that the house is haunted by a pisaach and it operates in one of the bedrooms,' he said into the iPhone camera as he walked past the empty living room. Light shone from the mobile phone's rear flash. He marched zealously towards one of the bedrooms and then continued, 'This is the very room where the servants of a British family saw a ghost that made them flee. That was one of the earliest accounts of the haunting, dating back to the pre-independence era. But I will prove to you guys tonight that these are stories made up and circulated by the superstitious.'

He walked around the room, capturing every corner of the place with his phone's camera. His hooded jacket kept him warm during the cold night. He pulled the hood back over his head and continued into the next room. He felt a sudden, sharp chill and turned around. There was something standing at the corner of

the room, near the window. He directed his phone's flashlight towards it. His eyes widened in shock moments before he calmed down and announced into the phone, 'Dear friends, in front of me is a beautiful but creepy sculpture of a woman, probably from the Victorian era.' He looked at the sculpture that pointed the index finger of its right hand towards the other room, which he walked into next.

'And now this room,' he said as he stepped into the master bedroom, 'is the room where General Richard had allegedly locked the pishaach. People say that this army officer was never seen again after entering the mansion. So, if he was never seen again after entering the mansion, how the hell can the very same people claim that he locked up the poltergeist in this room?' the youth asked.

'Oooh, do you think the pishaach is watching me mock it right now?' He laughed as he closed the door behind him and moved to the centre of the room. He settled on the floor. 'So this is where I will be sleeping tonight. Let's see what this poltergeist or pishaach does to me. I will see you guys tomorrow morning, when I will record the sunrise from the window of this room to prove that the haunting of this mansion is just an urban legend. Goodnight, guys!' he said and switched off the camera. Because of a glitch, he could not proceed nor go back to the previous menu on the phone.

'Iss phone ko bhi abhi hang hona tha!' he complained.

That was when Gaurav heard deep breaths and heavy footsteps. There was no one in the room and the only entrance was bolted, but then he noticed a shadow on the wall, dark under the phone's light. It was not of his own.

December 13, 1929

The sculpture of the woman pointed her finger towards a bedroom, which the British General walked into, noticing the door was already open. He closed it behind him and pulled out a watch from his coat's pocket. It stopped the moment he entered the room and closed the door. Something was not right. He then thought he heard something he could not identify. They were definitely not radio waves, but he could feel the disturbance in the air and it was coming from the centre of the room. He walked towards the area and there he felt a presence. He immediately pulled out a matchbox from his pocket and struck a matchstick, casting a shadow on the wall. And one on the floor.

The shadow on the floor did not have a hat on, as he did. It seemed to be cast by a hooded figure holding something rectangular.

Scared, the Englishman took to his feet and ran out, slamming the door behind him. In the passageway, between the two rooms, stood the sculpture of the woman. This time, it was pointing towards the other room. General Richard went inside the other room and to his horror, he stumbled into the same room he had just run out of—the one in which he had seen the poltergeist. Richard ran out of the room, but this time the sculpture was right in front of him, pointing at him before he ran into it.

The statue fell backwards, shattering against the wooden floor as its shards flew at the horrified man, plunging into his body. He

cried out in agony as blood oozed from every wound.

December 13, 2016

Gaurav did not understand what was happening around him. His phone was not working anymore. It wouldn't even switch off and the flashlight on the rear side was still shining brightly. Suddenly, he heard the door slam—even though he could see that it hadn't moved since he closed and bolted it.

Then, he heard sounds from the other room followed by a loud crash and something shattering. The sceptic in him wondered if it was all a prank, or if his mind had started playing tricks on him. With his heart in his throat, he walked towards the door. He unbolted it before slowly opening it to the darkness of the hallway. Then he noticed it.

Right in front of him he saw an index finger made of stone. It was pointing right at him. He looked up and saw the face of the Victorian sculpture, split with an evil grin.

December 12, 1998

Chandan Nagar, Pune.

Farhan was a timid child studying in class two of a little known public school in Indore. He enjoyed watching Scooby Doo on Cartoon Network—it was the nineties, when the channel aired classic, quality cartoons.

When he was lucky enough to stay up past his bedtime, he would sneak in an episode or two of the horror shows that aired on Zee and Sony. In his old apartment, Farhan used to sleep in between his parents. The new apartment, though, had two bedrooms, so his father made him sleep in the smaller one.

'You're a big boy now, you can't share a bed with us forever,' Ali had explained on the third night in their new apartment, which was two weeks ago.

'But I don't want to sleep alone. Please, Abbu,' Little Farhan pleaded.

'Come on, son. Maybe, one day, you'll have a little sibling to play with.'

'No, I don't want anybody else. Just sleep here na, abbu,' he cried

holding his father's hands.

'If you sleep in this room, by yourself like a big boy, I will let you watch late-night horror shows on Friday and Saturday. Big boys get to watch television after 9 p.m.,' he said, knowing it was an irresistible offer for the little horror fanatic.

Farhan's eyes sparkled with excitement but, at the same time, his heart sank. He frowned as he looked at the attached bathroom's door. Noticing the sudden change in his son's expressions, the father asked, 'What is it, beta?'

'Abbu, I don't like this room. Sometimes, I get up in the night… late in the night, when it is really dark and silent; I hear sounds from inside the bathroom.' Farhan revealed.

'What kind of sounds?'

'Like someone knocking from inside, as if trapped in the bathroom,' the little boy turned his bed towards his father and said, 'I don't like it.'

'Did you check inside?'

'No, I was scared. I prayed to Allah, like Ammi tells me to. The sounds do not go away though.'

The father kissed him on the forehead and with a gentle smile, said, 'Next time you hear the sounds, just call out to me. I will come and check it for you. Deal?'

'Okay, Abbu.'

'Now, sleep. Tomorrow, you have school. We'll watch the horror show tomorrow night,' Ali promised Farhan and walked towards the door.

Ali switched off the tube light, and switched on the night lamp, letting its red glow fill the room. Ali closed the door behind him, and suddenly, the poor little boy found himself all alone in the redness. Soon, he was snoring.

About forty minutes past midnight, Farhan woke from a terrible nightmare. His face was covered in sweat and his forehead and neck felt like they were burning. His heatbeat became normal as he realized that he was still in his red-hued bedroom. Silence slowly replaced the sound of his pulse. He calmed down and then pulled the blanket over his head and tried to sleep again.

In that deafening silence, Farhan heard breathing, slow and heavy. The sound was coming from the bathroom. Farhan peeped out from under his blanket and looked at the wooden door. It was closed.

Suddenly, there were knocks from the other side of the

bathroom door. He ducked back under the blanket and screamed.

'Abbu!' he cried.

Back in the master bedroom, Ali was making love to his beautiful wife, Sahiba. They had been trying for a baby ever since they moved in to new apartment. Ali was almost there when he heard his son scream for help.

'Damn! What am I going to do with this boy?'

'What happened?'

'He thinks there's a ghost in his bathroom.'

'I should not allow him to watch those stupid ghost cartoons.'

'No, it's okay. I will handle it. Let me finish this first.' Ali winked at his lovely wife.

Meanwhile, back in Farhan's room, strange guttural sounds were growing louder in the bathroom. He shut his eyes.

Then the wooden door creaked. Somebody opened the door, and he could hear footsteps moving towards the bed. When Farhan opened his eyes, the blanket was still over his head, and he could see the figure of a tall man approaching him through the red light.

'Abbu, help… the ghost is going to get me.' The little boy yelled again.

'Relax!' said Ali, as he pulled the blanket off the little boy's face.

Farhan was relieved to see his father standing there in his pyjama. The little boy hugged him tightly and felt safe again.

'Abbu, there was … someone inside. I heard him breathing and then he was knocking so loudly at the door.' The little boy

whimpered.

'Okay, I'll check the bathroom,' the father said. 'If there's nobody in there, then you have to sleep quietly like a good, big boy.'

'Okay.'

As Ali started walking towards the bathroom door, little Farhan looked on with anxious anticipation. In his mind, Farhan was praying for his father's safety. The light inside the room was still that bloody red, which was not comforting at all for the young boy. Ali arrived at the door and turned back to look at his son, who was eagerly waiting for his father to check the bathroom. Ali turned back towards the door and then opened it slowly. He peeped in but did not see anything, so he opened the door further and entered the bathroom. The bathroom's ceiling was not too high, standing at a little over six feet, Ali had to bend his neck a little to stand inside it. The bathroom had a small tub, a sink and Indian-style toilet. Since there was no window, the bathroom wall was fitted with a small exhaust fan for ventilation. Everything seemed to be in place. The door was ajar, and little Farhan could see his father's back. Suddenly, the door slammed and his father was trapped inside. Farhan could see that his father was trying to pull open the door from inside but it wouldn't move.

'Farhan! Help me,' his father cried, as if he was in pain.

The little boy did not know what to do. He ran to the door, knocking and crying as his father yelled in pain. A minute later, the father fell silent and there were no more desperate knocks on the door. Farhan wanted to open the door but was frozen with fear. With effort and prayer, he gathered the nerve to finally open it. What he saw next shocked him. There was nobody inside the bathroom.

'Abbu?' Farhan called out in confusion.

There was no response. Everything was silent inside the bathroom, as if nobody had ever entered it. The little boy's eyes welled up when, suddenly, something grabbed him from behind. He screamed and turned to look and—

It was just his father.

'What happened, Farhan? I told you I'd check the bathroom for you.'

'Yes, you did,' the boy said, scratching his head in confusion.

'Then why did you go inside the bathroom on your own? Do you know how much you were shouting?' the father complained.

'But… Abbu… You had gone inside and then the door locked itself.' The little boy noticed that his father was now wearing a

kurta and pyjama, but when he saw him enter the bathroom, he had only been wearing his pyjamas. Farhan explained further, 'You kept banging on the door for help and then you stopped screaming. I thought the ghost got you…'

'Enough, Farhan!' Ali said sternly. 'I know you don't want to sleep alone and that's why you're making up such silly stories and disturbing everyone at night. But your plan is not going to work with me. I will ground you for the next thirty days. That means no TV, no cricket and no ice cream.'

'But I did not lie. I swear on Allah that you were in the room and then you went to check the bathroom.'

'Then you just had a nightmare, son!'

Farhan sulked helplessly as Ali carried him back to the bed. He tucked the little boy under the blanket.

'Abbu, could you sleep with me tonight? Please, just tonight. I promise I will not ask you tomorrow,' Farhan requested, his eyes glistening with tears.

'Fine.' Ali calmed down.

Farhan moved to the side and allowed his father to lie down next to him on the wooden cot. The little boy, once again, felt at ease as he clung on to his father's chest, even though the kurta was a little itchy. Minutes later, little Farhan was snoring again. It was calm and quiet like before. Ali, spent after the passionate sex he had with his wife earlier, was hopeful that they would soon have a second child.

He was thinking about the new baby when he heard something —the cooing and fussing of an infant. Ali looked around suspiciously. Indeed, there were whimpers of a baby coming from the bathroom. The whimper then changed into a high-pitched cry and there were soft knocks on the door. Ali stared at the bathroom door in horror while his son, Farhan, slept peacefully by his side.

The Ghost Hotel of Agonda

There are many ghost stories about the abandoned old hotel near Agonda beach. The Portuguese were gone, but their accounts of the undead remained. Legends, little known to the world, were told and retold here by the locals who then passed them on to their grandchildren and so on.

However, not every haunting involves ghosts. Sometimes, the living were far more fearsome.

Niya Bhatt was a child who preferred to stay away from haunted places. She was born in Pune to a Gujarati father and an Anglo-Indian mother, and was visiting Agonda for the first time. The beach was lovely, like ones she had seen in pirate movies. The joy of being in a new place soon gave way to sorrow. Her father, Romil Bhatt, was busy chatting with her big rather corpulent uncle, Vibo Rodrigues, over a cup of coffee. They were talking about the abandoned hotel in the vicinity and the ghost that haunted it.

'I don't believe in ghosts. These stories have been made up by people who are either superstitious cowards or jobless,' Romil said firmly. 'If, in fact, that hotel has had some disturbances, they must not be because of ghosts. There must be criminals squatting in the abandoned building in the guise of ghosts.'

'I completely agree with you, Romil. So-called haunted houses are perfect hiding spots for criminals,' Rodrigues said dipping a Marie biscuit into his cup of coffee.

All those stories made Niya uncomfortable and the little girl slipped out of the house and ran to the beach with Mr Dolo, her teddy bear. Not even the host Rodrigues had noticed his niece leaving.

Soon the young girl was walking on the sands of Agonda beach where a boy, of about seventeen, was playing a beautiful tune on his guitar. Niya felt like singing along. The teenager smiled at the little girl and encouraged her to sing with him. After they finished the song, the teenager affectionately patted the girl's head and gave her a candy.

'Now, you should go back home. The sun will set soon and then this place will be full of ghosts,' the teenager said and walked away with his guitar.

Niya saw him disappear into the distance. Her father had told her never to speak to strangers when she was alone, and more importantly not to eat anything they offered. But she could not resist the candy. After all it was her favourite flavour: blueberry. She opened the wrapper and ate it before walking back towards her uncle's house.

Suddenly, she stopped. There was only the sea ahead of her, and the horizon far beyond. She felt dizzy. The smell of the sea seemed stronger and she had butterflies in her stomach. The little girl was in a trance and overwhelmed by her senses. She walked to where her feet took her, turning left. She focused her eyes only to be left mesmerized by what she saw.

A decaying structure stood at the far end of the beach, towering over dense green tress. She heard church bells ring and the sea roar in the distance as she approached the building. On one hand was the sea glimmering under the sun. On the other, the building. All her surroundings seemed to be spinning around her head, merging as one.

Niya felt her mind slipping away into the alluring trance. She had been drugged. She felt like someone was calling out her name, at a distance she felt like the teenage boy was calling her with the guitar. She could hear it and followed its sound into the trees. Her eyes were blank as stones.

The hotel door opened by itself and Niya walked into the multi-storeyed building. She was welcomed by a shroud of cobwebs. The dust made her cough and sneeze. Wild plants grew at places against the ruined walls. She noticed something moving on the floor, a closer look revealed that it was a deadly scorpion. Niya shuddered and moved on.

A dog howled somewhere, and the sound was accompanied by

footsteps—hurried ones. The footsteps were getting closer and closer and before she knew it, something pulled her back with sheer force. The movement forced Niya to turn around. A man slapped her across the cheek. The impact was so hard, the trance was broken and all of a sudden the light that illuminated the building seemed to fade away and Niya screamed in horror. She shrieked for help. Another man's hand placed itself on her mouth and she could not scream anymore. Niya wished that she had listened to her father and stayed inside the house of her boring uncle. The second man's hand brought a lantern near her and the milky face of the seven-year-old glowed under its golden light.

Niya saw what held her: the diabolic hands of a demonic man with a chiselled face, broken teeth and a rotten smile, that was red from pan.

'Look, our prey's here,' the man said.

His words were accompanied by the smell of tobacco that was mixed with something strong and unfamiliar to the girl. His eyes are reddened.

'Let's have some fun,' the second man suggested. He was the one who had his hand on her mouth.

'We will first remove your tongue, cut it out so that you can never speak. Chop off your fingers so that you can never write again.' He cackled and his partner joined in.

'And then we will send you far away, where you will beg and beg till you die a sorry death.'

Niya was terrified. Her little brown eyes filled up with tears and she started to cry, but as the man had covered her nose, she started suffocating.

Thunder roared outside, awakening the hundred-odd bats that were resting upstairs. The cloud of furious bats rushed downstairs and made their way towards the hallway where the two men held little Niya.

'What's happening?' The man with the chiselled face asked.

'I think the thunder woke them up,' the other reasoned.

But before they could say anything else, they witnessed something extraordinary. A spark ignited itself on the wall that gradually turned into a steady glow. The two men saw the light grow brighter, revealing an apparition right in front of the villains who had captured the little girl.

There was anger in the apparition's deadly eyes and it moved towards the two men who dropped the little girl. The ghost had vintage walking stick that he raised like a mighty sword. One of

the men turned and ran for his life. The other one seemed paralyzed and urinated on the floor. The cloud of bats followed the path of the ghost's walking stick and surrounded the scoundrel. They began attacking the frightened criminal who finally ran away.

Niya watched on, shocked and relieved at the same time. The ghost now started losing its brightness and revealed its human form: it was a tall white man. He looked strong.

'And they say the dead are a menace here,' the ghost shouted in a strange accent.

The white man's ghost looked down at the girl and his stare turned into a friendly grin as he held out his right hand. Niya was a little reluctant to shake his hand.

'Ola queridinha!' greeted the ghost in Portuguese. 'My name is Alberto D'Silva and this is my property.'

Niya's eyes grew large as she slowly lifted her fragile right hand to shake the ghost's hand when she heard a man screaming out her name.

'Niya, oh God! Are you alright, darling?' Romil ran towards her with the flashlight.

'Yes! I'm alright, thanks to…' she turned around but there was nobody, and the magical light had disappeared. 'Mr D'Silva…' she whispered.

The anxious father hugged his daughter. Niya heard more footsteps outside. The overweight uncle was flashing his torchlight over the stairs and on the wall to look for any intruders.

'They were scoundrels who kidnap kids of foreign tourists. Very common in this part of the city. It's an isolated place and nobody ever dares come up here,' the fat uncle said.

'Could these be the hauntings you talked about?' Romil asked while holding Niya tightly.

'No, no, they were just intruders. Living ones.' He switched off the flashlight and walked towards them. 'The one who haunts this abandoned hotel is not amongst the living.'

Niya did not speak a word. She was as silent as the sea that had calmed down after thunder and lightning. Romil picked her up and carried her out. Niya had grown pale. She embraced her father and rested her chin on his shoulder before looking at the staircase. It was dark, very dark. The ghostly apparition had disappeared.

When they reached the doorstep, she noticed something: a bright spark flitting across the hall. It was followed by a laugh

which only Niya heard. ‘Thank you, Mr D’Silva…’ she whispered.

Voices from a haunted college in Madras

The rainy day turned into a cloudy evening. There were sounds of thunder raging in the distance but the college was filled with excited students and teachers from institutions across the region, who had gathered for the festivities.

It was the night of the annual fest at the Missionary College (name changed), right before the college closed down for Christmas holidays. There were songs, dances, skits, an art exhibition and much more.

While everybody was enjoying the performances in the auditorium, Immanuel Jesudas crept out from the green room and entered the bathroom on the ground floor. After making sure everyone had left, he knocked on one of the toilet doors and it opened. Tharangini came out of the stall with a bag. She looked beautiful as ever. She had been hiding in there for over an hour.

'I'm glad you made it!' The nineteen-year-old boy looked into his girlfriend's eyes and said.

'Of course, I had to. I'm seeing you after such a long time,' Tharangini replied, blushing.

'Do you know where I'm going to take you?' He asked taking the bag from her.

'I will go anywhere. Wherever you take me.'

'I will take you to heaven…'

He held the girl's hand and quickly led her out of the toilet. That particular block was completely deserted as everyone was at the auditorium for the prize distribution and grand performance by a celebrity singer.

A few minutes later, they were walking through halls and corridors until they reached the biology lab. He pulled out a duplicate key and twisted it in the keyhole. He carefully pushed open the door and they went inside, locking it behind them. Unlike the endless corridor, the lights were off inside the lab.

'You made a brave decision today,' Immanuel said as he ran his thick fingers through her silky black hair.

'I would do anything for you,' she said. She felt a tingling sensation where Immanuel touched her. She remarked bashfully, 'Stop that. Something happens to me…'

Taking in a deep breath, he asked, 'Are you ready for it, Tharu?'

They could hear the crowd cheering in the auditorium.

'I… I don't know.'

'It's okay if you do not want to…' he offered, making sure she was ready for the tender act of making love.

'Would you be upset if I didn't want to do it?' she asked hoping that he would oblige.

'I do not know.' He said with disappointment.'

'I love you, Immanuel…'

'I love you too.' He replied and then the two lovers looked into each other's eyes before kissing.

It was then that they heard footsteps outside. He held Tharangini's hand tightly as they waited anxiously behind the lab assistant's table. The footsteps stopped near the door, and there was silence for few seconds before they heard the sound of a key turning in the keyhole. The door creaked open, letting in the dim light from the corridor. The lights blinked and then the door slammed shut, but nobody entered. The footsteps were back, and this time they came from inside the unlit biology lab.

'What's happening?' Tharangini whimpered with tears in her eyes.

'Shh…' Immanuel pressed a finger against his girlfriend's lips.

Suddenly, the lights inside the biology room were turned on. A second later, they all went off. And on and off again, as if teasing the couple hiding in a corner. Immanuel held on to the crucifix he

wore at his neck and prayed. They knew that something other-worldly was present in the room with them as they heard sounds of conversations. It kept growing louder and finally they heard a burst of diabolical laughter. It felt like they were inside a classroom full of invisible students.

'Pin-drop silence, I say!' a male voice shouted. The laughter and conversations stopped. 'What are you two doing during my lecture?' the voice seem to be directed at the couple behind the table.

Immanuel and Tharangini looked at each other in horror as they could not explain what was going on.

'I'm sorry, Sir…' Immanuel apologized looking at the wall, 'but this was not her fault, really. It was my idea.'

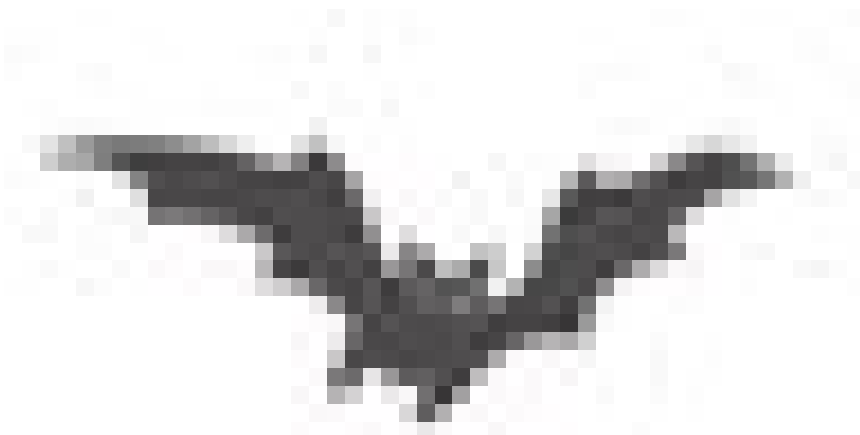
'Oh! So, you admit your sin.' The invisible male's voice said.

'Please let us go,' Immanuel said as he held his girlfriend's hand.

They got up slowly and started towards the door.

'Oh, no! Nobody gets to be naughty during my lecture. You will be punished for your sins.'

And then something knocked the two on the head from behind. They kept shouting for help as the sound of evil laughter filled the room again, clashing with the loud cheers from the auditorium. Nobody heard the young lovers scream.



The college was officially closed for the Christmas holidays. When it opened, Muthu, the lab assistant, was the first to enter the lab. He was shocked to see that it had been ransacked. The instruments, seats, tubes and papers were lying on the floor as if

they had been tossed around. What Muthu saw next froze his blood. When he walked over to his table, he noticed something engraved on it.

'Help us!' had been scratched into the table, smeared with blood.

The Test of Time

A story from Goa

They say true love survives the test of time and lives on even after the lovers depart from this world. Love lived on as moving poetry or breathtaking monuments.

However, the love stories of other, ordinary people did not interest Joy and Maya. Both of them fell in love in college, eloped —since they did not belong to the same religion—and got married at a Goan beach with the setting sun as their lawful witness. Life was bliss and they could never think of spending one moment without each other.

Joy, a photojournalist by profession, had a tough time making money from his freelance job. While Maya was a bank employee with a steady source of income. Maya supported her husband during difficult times, which never seemed to end as far as his career was concerned. Weekdays were spent working and on weekends they enjoyed long drives along the sandy coasts of Goa. Joy would click many beautiful pictures and Maya would pose for portraits.

It was the last weekend of May 2016 and the young couple had stopped at Dona Paula to click pictures. After capturing some amazing moments under the sea at the water-sports hub, Maya was relaxing on the beach in her floral dress. She gently put her

hand under the sand and slowly lifted her palm, letting the grains fall through her fingers.

'There, there … stay still,' Joy instructed and focused his lens on her fingers, 'Good…' he said, clicking.

Joy clicked a few more shots in a burst and then showed her the preview on the camera's LCD monitor.

'Wow, that's amazing,' Maya said, smiling. She noticed disappointment in her husband's eyes. 'What happened?'

'Let's take another one. Can you do it again, please?' he requested.

'Sure.'

Maya scooped up more sand for the shot, while Joy clicked few pictures. He stopped when the disappearing sand revealed a ruby ring at the centre of her palm. Both of them stared at the ring, which sparkled in the sun.

'Wow. Do you think it's real?' Joy asked.

'Maybe. But it is beautiful.'

'If it's real, we can get a lot of money for it. Looks like pure gold, too,' the struggling photojournalist observed.

'Finders keepers!' Maya exclaimed and closed her fist around it. 'Maybe it's a lucky charm and we were destined to find it here.'

'As you wish, my dear. Nothing can be more precious to me than you,' he said and kissed his wife in the light of the setting sun.

They had a quiet drive home and along the way Maya stared at her new possession, the ruby ring. Something was engraved on the inner side in an elegant font. It looked vintage. She slipped it around her ring finger, fitting it neatly above her platinum wedding ring.

The couple arrived home, had dinner and went to sleep. But in the middle of the night, Maya started shivering and mumbling in her sleep. Joy woke up to tend to his wife but she would not open her eyes. She kept twisting and turning in her sleep. Joy got nervous and tried his best to wake his wife but everything failed. Even his attempt at sprinkling ice-cold water on her sweat-covered face did not help.

'Bab… Babuli… Babulidas. Find Babulidas…' she started muttering.

'Babuli? Who is that? Wake up, please.' Her husband cried as he ran his palm over her scorching forehead and neck.

Joy called Dr Kulkarni, who lived above their apartment. The bald doctor of about fifty checked his wife's pulse and a look of worry spread over his face.

'What is it, doctor?' Joy asked anxiously.

'Her pulse is racing. I'm not sure, but this might be what we call sepsis. Even if we take blood samples, reports will arrive too late.'

'No… no… Babuli…' Maya muttered again.

'What is she saying?' The doctor asked.

'I do not know. She has been talking about some Babulidas of Fonda. We have never met anybody by that name.'

'I can explain all the symptoms except for the occasional blabbering. When did it start?'

'We went to the beach earlier. Did some scuba diving and then came back after resting for few minutes at the beach. We did not eat anything from outside. We were carrying food with us.'

'Maybe something venomous stung her in the water.'

'No, doctor. She did not go into the water. Only I did the diving, she just waited on the boat for me.'

'Maybe something bit her on the beach.'

'Well, we did find a ring on the beach. She went on to wear.' He said eyeing the sparkling ruby ring in his wife's hand.

'Maybe the ring was hiding a venomous insect.'

'Return the ring… find Babulidas of Fonda… 93, Krishna Colony…' the unconscious wife chanted breathlessly.

The doctor and husband stared at the woman in disbelief. Dr Kulkarni looked at the ring.

'I will be right back.' Dr Kulkarni said and left immediately.

Five minutes later, the doctor returned wearing rubber gloves. He removed the ring from the woman's finger. The moment the ring came off, she calmed down and fell into a deep and peaceful sleep. Joy looked at it in disbelief.

'What just happened doctor?' Joy asked.

'Well, I know it might be hard to believe but perhaps you should really look for Babulidas. He might be the rightful owner of the ring.'

'Where will I find him?'

'She mentioned some address, didn't she?'

'Yes.'

'Try it tomorrow. For now, she seems to be unconscious but her pulse is coming back to normal. I will give her an antipyretic.'

After finishing his job, the doctor began preparing to leave. At the door, he stopped and turned to look at a confused Joy.

'Joy, I know this will sound strange coming from a doctor but

there are certain things we cannot explain. Find Babulidas…' He handed the ring to Joy.

The following morning, Joy Mascarenhas drove all the way to Fonda, through thick and thin alleys, finally arriving at Krishna Colony: a small Gujarati settlement. Door number 93 had a dusty board that read: Babulidas Ghanshyamdas Madhvani. He knocked at the door. Nobody answered it, but when Joy was about to leave, the rusty bolt seemed to move inside. The door opened and an old man, of about ninety, appeared.

'Mr Babulidas?' Joy inquired.

'Yes,' the man replied in a frail voice.

'I think this belongs to you,' Joy said as he pulled out the ring from his pocket and held it in front of the old man.

The old man looked at it carefully. He had to bring his face right in front of the ring to see it clearly. He took it from Joy's hand and examined the engraving on the inner side of the ring. A smile spread on his wrinkled face, and a tear rolled down his face.

'Ah … bless you, my son…' the man patted Joy's head and with a heavy heart, he said, 'This was the last token of love that I gave her. You know, Roopvati loved it. She was my wife. I lost her years ago. She drowned in the sea. We could not even find her body and I have been living on as if only to see her again. I always believed that she was never gone.' The old man sobbed. 'I had lost hope of seeing her in this life and was preparing to meet her in the next… but God would not even take me. Now, thanks to you, son… I am reunited with a part of my true love. I do not know how to repay you.' The old man trembled with joy and relief and even sorrow.

‘No, sir, please. All I need is your blessing. This discovery was made by my wife. She found the ring.’

‘But how did you know this ring belonged to my wife? How did you find my house?’ the old man asked.

‘Let’s say that sometimes when you believe in something, it will defy everything to find its way to you. It was your true love that brought me here,’ Joy said with a smile.

After returning the ring and enjoying a cup of tea with the old man, Joy left for home. He had tears in his eyes when he got a call from Dr Kulkarni, who had been looking after his wife back home.

‘Joy, I believe the ring has been returned to its rightful owner,’ Dr Kulkarni said on the phone.

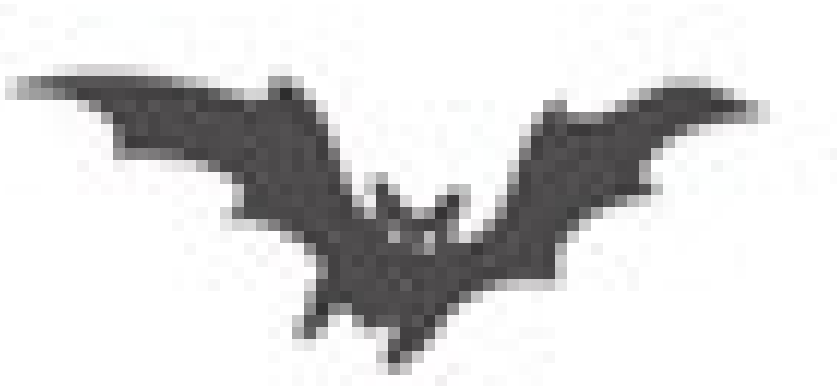
‘Yes, it has.’

‘Well, your wife just gained consciousness.’

‘Thank God!’ Joy let out a sigh of relief.

‘Funny thing is that she does not remember anything about the ring. She said she went to the beach and came back tired.’ The doctor paused and then advised, ‘It would be better to not tell her about it. She might not handle it well if she finds out that she was possessed.’

A Night in Kulbhat



Jaggu and Ballu were best friends and both of them shared their birthday, which fell on the twelfth of December. In 2017, Jaggu and Ballu celebrated the day by getting all their friends drunk on local toddy. Eventually everyone left for their respective homes after 10 p.m.

'Everyone's changed,' Jaggu said as he watched the last of their guests leaving the toddy shop. He was struggling to stand.

'Marriage changes everything, buddy,' Ballu said as he paid the bill.

'Aye, please buy one more bottle. We will need it.' Jaggu burped and then continued, 'It's freaking cold out there and I'm in no mood to go home tonight.'

'Fine!' Ballu placed a hundred-rupee note on the counter.

'Will we ever get married?' Jaggu wondered.

'Why do you ask?'

'Sometimes I get so jealous of those bastards.'

'Come on, they are married. You and I are free birds.'

Ballu and Jaggu were out on the narrow countryside road, guided by the light from Ballu's phone. Ballu felt the chill in the night air while Jaggu waddled on the road, sipping from the bottle.

'Free bird, my foot!' Jaggu spat on the road. 'I am twenty-seven today and still I have not done it. It's torture. I'm human and I have needs. Sometimes I just feel like pouncing on a willing and beautiful woman and…'

'And?'

Jaggy threw his arm in the air and sighed, 'Uff! If I was living in a foreign country, I am sure I would have done it for the first time ten years ago.'

'You should be happy with what you have.'

'Yeah.' Jaggu smiled looking at the half-empty bottle of toddy, 'I'm happy with what I have. I just need a little more, you know.'

Suddenly Jaggu stopped in the middle of the empty, lonely road. He raised his arm again and looked towards the skies and prayed, 'Oh God, if you are there then please fulfil my deepest wish this year. You know what it is, right?'

'You prayed for it last year too, but it didn't happen,' Ballu joked as he snatched the bottle form Jaggu and drank.

'Shut up!'

'Where are we going?'

'Anywhere but home. Let's just walk this road as long as we can or until the road ends. How about that for our birthday?' Jaggu suggested.

'You are too drunk to feel the freezing cold right now, but

tomorrow I'm sure that your bones will refuse to move.'

'Who knows about tomorrow? Let's do this tonight.'

'I should have taken you to the dance bar in Jaisalmer,' Ballu joked again. He added, 'Chalo, let's do it. Let's walk till we drop.'

The two friends walked on, talking about everything under the sun, and occasionally the desperate Jaggu would bring in the topic of marriage or sex. Ballu was feeling sleepy and he wanted to stop somewhere, but there was no town or village around. At one point in the night, they saw a large signboard with a structure nearby that looked roughly like an unused bus stop. Ballu convinced Jaggu to rest at the bus stop—or whatever that was.

The two of them settled inside the small space, resting their backs against the stone wall. Jaggu's head was spinning but he did not feel sleepy at all. Then they heard someone cough right next to them.

'What's that?' Jaggu jumped to his feet.

'Who are you?' Ballu said rushing out of the structure and on to the road.

They noticed that it was actually a veiled woman in a traditional Rajasthani skirt and blouse. Ballu shined his phone's light on her face revealing shapely, plum coloured lips. Jaggu could feel the demon inside him awaken.

'Sir, I'm also resting here. I was too scared to travel alone.'

'But what are you doing here?'

'I come from the small village of Kulbhat. I had gone to the town with my sister to purchase some medicines for our little

brother. He has been sick for a couple of days. We missed the last bus. So, we started walking back to our village. On the way, some men offered us a lift and we got in with them. However, they were not good men, so we jumped off their van when we got a chance and then ran until I found this shelter to hide.' The woman revealed in a sweet voice.

'I am sorry to hear that. But do not worry. We are good men and we will protect you.' Jaggu said, trying to keep his voice as steady as possible to conceal his drunken state.

'Oh, thank you, sir. Will you accompany us to my village? It is only an hour away from here. It would be really good if we can get there as soon as possible so that I can give my brother these medicines.' She lifted a small pouch that was tied to her skirt. She displayed it for the men to see. The pouch slipped from her hand it fell on the road. Jaggu stepped forward and helped the woman pick it up, thus getting to feel the warm skin of her arms. He was driven by the lust he could barely control. However, behind him, Ballu stepped back and broke into a cold sweat.

'You are very beautiful, and it is my duty to take you home,' Jaggu said, overcome with lust.

'You will be rewarded for your act,' the woman said gravely. 'As you deserve.'

Ballu caught hold of Jaggu's hand and tried to pull him back. But Jaggu freed himself and stared at the woman.

'Will you wait for a minute?' the woman asked, 'I think my sister is asleep behind this old thing.'

'Of course, we will wait here,' Jaggu said.

The woman walked to the backside of the bus stop. There was silence for a moment.

'What more could you ask for? There are two of them, so you won't have to sit it out, my friend! God has finally heard my prayer. This is the best birthday ever,' Jaggu said.

Ballu pulled Jaggu close to him. Ballu's hands were shaking.

'How can you feel cold when we have such a hot woman with us?' Jaggu said and chuckled.

'Because,' Ballu pointed the mobile phone's light at the sandy ground on the side of the road, to where the woman had just walked. The sight of the woman's footprint on the sand shocked Jaggu. Ballu said in horror: 'Her feet are backwards…'

Satan and the Smoker

A story from Aizawl

After a week spent on fieldwork in the capital of Mizoram, Sameer was on the final leg of his official trip to Aizawl. After dinner he realized that he had run out of smokes. So, he decided to take a stroll through the streets and look for cigarette vendors. Mizoram used to be a dry state and ever since that changed, it enjoyed a booming nightlife. Sameer's hotel was near the state museum. He had just passed one of the popular places hoping to find cigarettes. He did not see any vendor though, so he went ahead and asked the big man who was standing at the entrance of the restaurant.

'Where can I buy some cigarettes around here?'

'Sorry, you will not find anything here. You can try the small shop in the lane behind this restaurant,' the big man said.

'How do I get there?'

'Just go straight and take a right, you should be on the back road. I hope you have a torch with you.'

'I have my iPhone.'

'That should do. Just do not stray into the wrong lane.'

Sameer looked away from the man who was standing at the entrance to check the way he had mentioned. When he turned

back, the man was gone. Sameer figured he had gone into the restaurant and started off in the suggested direction. After walking for ten minutes, he saw a small lane on the right.

This must be it. He walked into the alley that did not have any streetlights at all, just like the big man at the restaurant had said. There were few shops here and there, and all of them were closed for the night.

Guided by the light from his iPhone, Sameer proceeded with his quest for one last cigarette for the night. The narrow lane stretched till it branched into a junction of sorts at some distance.

One street light was glowing dimly at the junction. As per the instructions, Sameer had to take a right from the junction. However, the lanky civil engineer from Chandigarh was at least a few hundred meters away from it. Something moved behind the distant street lights beam. Sameer thought he saw small feet, like a child's. He immediately shined the light around the area and saw a little girl in a dirty pink frock, hiding behind one of the closed shops in the lane. But before he could call out to the girl, he heard footsteps. Three local men, in their twenties, were walking back from junction with metal rods. They did not stop when they saw Sameer, but spoke to each other in the local language. The three men split and looked in three different directions individually.

One of them came running to Sameer and asked, 'Did you see a little girl come this way?'

Sameer was worried for the girl. 'Why?' he asked.

'None of your business. Did you see her?'

'She went that way.' Sameer lied, pointing towards the direction he had come from.

The youth called his friends and they followed him to where Sameer had pointed. Sameer was relieved.

After making sure that the boys were gone, Sameer slowly walked towards the shop. He noticed that the there was a very thin path between the shop and the wall next to it. He walked through the narrow path, and the tips of his broad shoulders rubbed against the walls on both sides.

'Hello?' Sameer called out in a friendly tone. He was careful not to scare away the little girl.

Few meters ahead he saw a dead-end and there was no place to go. The metallic door on the right side had a thick lock on it, while on the other side stood the towering wall. There was no way the girl could have jumped over the wall, or broken the lock on the

door. But then where did she go?

Sameer heard light footsteps behind him. He turned around and saw the silhouette of the little girl, standing with her head lowered. Her dress was not pink like he thought—it was actually blood-stained white. She was holding on to something in her right hand. Sameer tried to shine the torch on her face but the phone died.

'Beta, are you alright?' He asked, stammering a little.

There was no reply, just the sound of the girl breathing heavily.

'It's okay. I'm not here to harm you. I'm not one of them.'

The deep breathing continued, and it was getting more disturbing. Sameer tried to switch on his iPhone but couldn't.

'Come, let's get out of here and find your parents.'

Sameer said and walked to the girl, he tried to hold her hand but it was cold as ice. The girl's hand slipped from Sameer's grip. Before he could move another inch, the girl screamed and plunged the object she was holding into Sameer's side His shirt tore open and blood began to spread over it. The little girl had attacked him with a knife. Sameer fell back in pain and horror. The girl opened her mouth and roared like a beast. Her teeth were sharp. The girl lifted her knife to plunge it into his heart when, suddenly, he heard noises behind her. A sack was thrown over the girl and she was struggling to get it off. It was one of the boys who was looking for her. He had snatched the knife from the girl's hand and began tying a rope around the sack. She was growling like a rabid wolf inside it. He then sprinkled water over the girl and she calmed down a little.

'You should not have lied,' the boy said, looking piercingly into Sameer's horror-stricken eyes.

'But… but… what was that? Was she even human?' Sameer asked.

'No. Years ago, a Satanist used to live here. He was killed by the local people on this night. Every year, he possesses someone vulnerable to avenge his death. We have been protecting the people here,' the local boy explained. 'This young girl, Mary, was a God-fearing innocent. Did you see the blood on her skirt?'

'Yes…'

'She chopped her brother into pieces before jumping out the window. Her parents informed us about her heinous act, so we knew she was possessed.'

'I'm sorry…' Sameer apologized examining his wound.

'Don't touch it. It may get worse. Just come with us,' the boy

offered.

'It's not too deep. I will manage,' Sameer said.

'You don't understand. If you do not come, then we will have to take you by force. The blood has to be cleansed because it came in contact with the possessed girl's blood. You have an equal chance of being possessed.'

'What the hell?'

'Yes, you will have to be cleansed with warm toddy and dried inside a room filled with tobacco fumes,' the other boy said, hoisting the sack with the girl over his shoulder.

Sameer didn't protest after that. They had him at tobacco fumes.

A story from a haunted society in Thane

Arun Prakash had moved into the road-facing apartment on the second floor with his wife and one-year-old baby just a couple of days ago.

One day, when Arun returned from the office, nobody answered the door. He called his wife on her cell phone but it went unanswered too, even though he could hear the phone ringing inside the apartment. He then turned the doorknob and it opened.

'Why would she leave the front door unlocked?' He asked himself as he entered the house.

There were a few empty cartons in the living room, which they had used to move their belongings from Delhi to Thane. The furniture was all arranged properly and he assumed that his wife had done it earlier that day.

'Neha? Where are you?' He called out.

He tossed his briefcase on to the sofa and started towards his bedroom and then unfastened his tie. He dropped the tie on the floor hoping it would eventually be picked up by his wife. As he got to the closed bedroom door, he heard his wife's soothing voice humming a lullaby to their baby.

‘Oh, so that is what was keeping you busy,’ he said as he turned the bedroom door’s knob. ‘Neha, why did you leave the front door unlocked?’

The bedroom door did not open but the humming stopped. The baby gave out a gentle laugh.

‘Neha? Open the door, yaar. I’m very tired. Let me in.’

He knocked on the door several times, but there was no response. He could hear his wife murmuring something at which the baby responded with more soft laughter.

‘What the hell, Neha!’ he shouted in frustration.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang. Arun sighed and went to answer the door. When he opened the door, he took two steps back when he saw his wife.

‘What? How did you get here?’ Arun asked in shock.

‘I went to dispose of some empty cartons. I saw you coming so I left the door open.’

‘And your phone?’

‘It’s inside the room. I had no pockets and my hands were full.’

‘If you are here, then who the hell is singing songs to our baby in the bedroom?’ he sprinted back, jumping over the empty carton and sofa.

He started knocking on the door like a crazy man. Alerted by her husband’s sudden behavior, Neha ran over.

‘Wait!’ Neha said.

‘Get out whoever is inside. Don’t you dare do anything to our baby,’ Arun warned aggressively, as he stepped aside.

Neha tried her luck at the door’s knob. It opened.

‘It’s open,’ Neha said and went inside.

Arun followed. Both of them looked at the baby, who was sleeping in peace. There was nobody else in the room.

‘I swear, I heard your voice. I can’t mistake your voice for someone else’s,’ Arun explained.

Neha was silent like a statue.

‘Neha?’

‘And I swear I wiped the baby’s mouth after feeding him this afternoon,’ Neha said as she pointed towards the little drops of milk around the baby’s mouth.

As Neha and Arun exchanged horrified glances, the baby laughed softly in its sleep.

December 20, 2012

Friends, what are you doing tonight? Are you heading to a party or simply going home after work? If you are heading towards Coimbatore on the national highway from Bangalore, then beware! Three dead bodies have been found in Sathyamangalam forest. Is this the work of a wild animal or of a cold-blooded serial killer?

Selvaraj switched off the radio, the bubbly voice of the RJ was irritating him further. He coughed a little and was uncomfortable. He reached out for tissues from the box resting in the centre console of his sedan. He coughed into it and then crumpled the tissue paper into a useless ball, which he threw out the window.

Selvaraj, a stout man with a chiseled, brown face and neatly trimmed gray stubble, was in his early forties. The black of the Bluetooth earpiece blended well with the black cotton shirt. At six feet four inches, his sedan gave him a tough time as he tried to adjust himself on the front seat. His knees kept banging against the steering wheel or the dashboard every time he applied the brake. On the seat behind him, lay a black leather suitcase. The mobile phone in his pocket rang and he answered it without looking at the screen.

'I don't want to talk to you, idiot!' he growled into the Bluetooth hands-free device. 'You could not get through one deal without messing up, and because of you guys I have to go to Ponappa—and that too alone by the jungle route in the night.'

'Sir, I would not suggest you take that route. Better take the highway,' a voice answered sheepishly.

'No, I cannot risk everything by taking the highway. I have heard there is a police patrol on there. I will deal with you once I return. Enjoy tonight, 'cause when I come back to Bangalore tomorrow, your world is going to end,' Selvaraj threatened in his husky voice and then disconnected the call.

Selvaraj had always been short tempered. The sedan slowed down as it reached a darker, densely wooded area. Deciduous trees stood in straight lines on either side of the road. Selvaraj turned the steering wheel to the left and his vehicle went off the road and entered a small path that snaked through the dreaded forest. His entire body shook as the pebbles and rocks on the untarred path revolted against the tyres.

The only source of light was the headlight from Selvaraj's car. He began to worry about wild animals like tigers and elephants, even though their numbers had come down drastically during the nineties when the notorious Veerappan started poaching them for their skin, teeth and ivory. Selvaraj coughed a bit more and suddenly heard an explosion as his car jerked to a stop. He tried the ignition twice, three times, but the car would not start.

'Jesus!' he swore as he looked for the car's release hatch on the bottom of the dashboard, under the steering column. The car's hood unlocked and loosened, letting out hot fumes. The headlight beamed into the infinite darkness of the forest. Selvaraj got out of the car and pulled up the unlocked hood. The hot fumes hissed furiously, sending the man into a fit of coughs. He stepped aside, into the darkness and spat some phlegm on to the bush on the side of the path. It carried traces of blood.

Selvaraj turned back to the car and saw, through the beam of the headlights, the silhouette of a wild beast walking towards it. As it got closer, he calmed down. It was not a beast, it was a man with unkempt hair.

'Hey, what happened, tambi?' the man asked in Tamil. He had cuts and bruises on his face and neck.

Selvaraj took a few moments to take in the stranger's appearance. The recently serviced car breaking down in the middle of the jungle was strange enough, but the appearance of an odd-looking man in a dangerous area warranted caution and

made him very nervous.

'I have no idea. The engine…' the taller man said and looked at the fumes.

'Did you check the radiator?' the long-haired man inquired.

Selvaraj bent and looked under the car for signs of leakage. Noticing the puddle of coolant he asked, in a tone that was more taunting than courteous, 'Are you a mechanic?'

'No!' the stranger chuckled. 'I once saw that in a movie. But it works here, most of the time.'

'Most of the time? You mean, it happens regularly in these parts?' Selvaraj asked, his brows twitching with anxiety.

'Almost every time a stranger brings a vehicle here in the night, this happens. He doesn't like trespassers.'

'He?' asked Selvaraj.

'You know who… the man who once reigned over this jungle. When he was alive, he was a nightmare for any human who dared to cross his path, and now that he is dead, even the leaves in this jungle shiver at the mere utterance of his name,' the stranger said, raising his face to look at the canopy above, there were bats hanging from the higher branches.

Selvaraj, startled by the sight of the creatures, looked away and walked back to his car. He stood facing the front window and put his left hand in. The lights went off first.

'You are good with words,' Selvaraj said as he pulled another hatch that opened the trunk. 'but I don't care.'

From the trunk, Selvaraj picked up a white plastic can and thin, black flashlight.

'Do you know where I can get some water?' Selvaraj asked the stranger turning on the flashlight. The light illuminated the stranger's disgusting face.

'Of course, I can show you the way,' he said as he stepped aside and waved his right hand towards the south, revealing the endless path through the woods. It went on for as long as that single beam of light could show. When Selvaraj started off in the direction, the stranger murmured, 'They all take the path of no return…'

Everything felt dead in that dark and eerie forest, including the trees. The branches, with their dying leaves, occasionally brushed over the tall man's head. Selvaraj coughed again.

'This air reeks of death and decay!' the stranger hissed.

'If this is a place of no return and all the crap that you have been spurting is true, then what the hell are you doing here in the first place? Scaring people?' Selvaraj asked.

'How does it matter? And if I ask you the same question, would you answer?' the man countered, scratching his head.

'That's none of your business,' Selvaraj replied.

'But you see, it is my business to inform you that your life is in danger.'

'Are you that freaking serial killer that they have been talking about on the radio?'

The stranger chuckled. 'How do I know it is not you?' He said.

Selvaraj was irritated. He could not tolerate the crazy man anymore. He just wanted to find water and use it to start his car and leave the place. He had to deliver the goods to Ponappa before his men went crazy.

'How far is it?' Selvaraj inquired keeping an even tone.

'The lake is just a minute away.'

A minute later, they were standing at the bank of a lake that reflected the crescent moon. Selvaraj unscrewed the lid of the can and dipped it into the water. The ripples it made on the surface became more intense, as if the entire lake had been disturbed, and he felt sudden gush of cold air coming in from over the water. The can was filled and he put the lid back on. He got up with the can in one hand and the lit flashlight in the other, but to his surprise, the stranger was gone. He looked around but there was no one there.

'Hello?' Selvaraj called out. The only reply came in the form of echoes of his own voice. Selvaraj shined the flashlight around but he did not care to go after the crazy man.

The wind got stronger and the bats swayed with the branches. Selvaraj had a good memory and knew he could make his way back without any help. He held out the flashlight, looking for signs of his sedan. In ten minutes, he was almost there. At a distance of about two hundred meters, he could see the front of his car, the fumes had died out completely.

Perfect timing, he thought, for pouring the water to cool it down further. He walked briskly and was soon opening the car's bonnet and filling the water in the slightly cooled radiator. He knew he would not be able to drive too far since the radiator needed water and coolant in an equal ratio, so he had to get the coolant as soon as possible.

However, that was only possible after he got out of the jungle. Going further would be difficult, so he decided to turn around and go back to the highway. The police could be dodged, he thought.

After closing the hood, he got into the car and placed the can and the flashlight on the seat next to him. He was about to start

the car when he noticed something missing from the backseat: the black leather suitcase. He looked under the seat, tense, and finally got out of the car.

'What the hell!' he vented angrily.

'Relax!' said a very familiar voice that came from behind Selvaraj.

Selvaraj turned around and saw a man with patches of peeling skin on his face. The eyes were familiar—like those of the stranger he had met earlier. But this man was wearing a police uniform and had a service revolver pointed at Selvaraj.

'You?' Selvaraj said.

Confidential:

Inspector Raghavan's statement for Operation Silkworm

December 27, 2012

It was rather strange. After catching many drug peddlers and smugglers in the jungle, that night played out very differently. I had been hunting down Ponappa, the druglord, who was smuggling a new kind of drug to metros. Our mission was to

catch the middlemen during a transaction. Our ultimate aim was to track down Ponappa in his hideout and put an end to his reign before the drug made its way to the big cities. We had deliberately spread a false rumor about serial killings so that only those with a strong motive would dare venture into the forest. That night, we received information about Simon Selvaraj, a drug dealer from Bangalore. His own man, who was supposed to be the carrier, was the source. This forced Selvaraj to take up the job on his own and he drove all the way from Bangalore with a suitcase full of cash. December 31was just a week away and if he failed to acquire the drugs, he would lose to rivals in Bangalore.

While other officers were patrolling at different locations, mostly on the highway, I was waiting for Selvaraj near the lake. None of us knew which route he would take, but we were all ready to intercept. Those who were in pocket roads, or in the jungle, had spread nails to puncture tires. While I sat near the lake, I felt extremely cold at regular intervals, as if something invisible was circling me. At one particular moment I felt like I would faint, but by then I heard a loud bang. I knew it was the car but when I got up, I realized that I had not planted any trap or nails there at all. Somehow, I knew I was not alone in the jungle.

There was no way that Selvaraj would suspect me of being an undercover officer. When Selvaraj was taking water from the lake, I left to collect the money and signal the others. As I walked back, I heard footsteps and assuming that it was Selvaraj, I did not turn but sprinted onwards. And that time, I felt the cold air following me to the car. Ignoring the chills, I collected the suitcase and then waited for the criminal to arrive. I was quite sure that the man had grown suspicious of me and would turn around, so, I made sure that he did not escape. I had held him at gunpoint but the man pulled out a revolver and shot at me. The bullet narrowly missed my heart, but it did hit a rib. Before he could shoot again, I shot him. As the man's dying body fell on the ground, I realized that an opportunity to track Ponappa was lost. I dragged myself along the path to the lake, dripping blood all along the way.

It was eerily silent. My officers had not yet arrived and my throat was drying up. I drank some water from the lake. As I was about to cup more water in my hands, I saw some light behind me, and heard footsteps. I feared it was Selvaraj, but when I turned around, the sight left me shocked.

It was a man, not too tall, but very lean. His head was round at the top and tapered towards the chin and he had a thick moustache. He was holding a rifle and the air went cold around him. His eyes were black and dry, with the pupils dilated. They

looked lifeless. My thoughts were clouded and I felt light headed. It was at that moment I heard him warn me: 'This is my jungle, stay out of it!' Then I fell unconscious. Two days later I opened my eyes in the hospital in Coimbatore. Had I seen the ghost of Veerappan or is he still alive?

There was no air inside the interrogation room, or perhaps he just felt suffocated as he stared at the grey walls that surrounded him. Tushar did not have any other option but to sit there until someone let him go. He was handcuffed to the chair with a painfully dry throat. He looked pale and shook his head, trying to shake off the flashes that interrupted his vision. The door behind him opened and a tall, stout military man marched towards the seat in front of Tushar. He sat and looked straight into Tushar's tired eyes.

'Mr Tushar Awasthi, what were you doing in a restricted zone?' the army man asked firmly.

'I… I do not remember, sir…' Tushar said in a low voice, which was all that he could manage.

'Gill. Major Pratap Gill,' the man supplied.

'Yes, Major Gill, I really do not remember.'

'It is impossible for any civilian to penetrate our three-layers of security. How did you enter the restricted zone?'

'I told you, Major Gill. I do not…'

'Are you with the ISI or ISIS?' the major asked, bending forward in his seat.

'Sir…'

'Major!'

'Major, are you even listening to me? You have confiscated

everything I have. You can check my Aadhaar card—I am a regular finance guy working with an American bank in Gurgaon. I really do not have any links with the organizations you mentioned,' Tushar said desperately.

'Then tell me, how and why did you enter the restricted zone?' Major Gill asked, punching each word out of his mouth as if they were bullets meant for the trespasser.

'Okay, I shall tell you what happened exactly as I remember it, but please don't judge me.'

'Go ahead.'

'I was on a three-day expedition to Ladakh. After spending the second day in Spiti Valley, I took off in my rented vehicle. I was headed to my next destination: Nakeela Pass. I started at eleven last night and at about seven in the morning, I arrived at Gata Loops. I parked my vehicle and started on foot. I had strapped my GoPro camera to my chest as I wanted to capture the scenic beauty in a time-lapse video. I trekked by the hairpin bends, recording everything on the way. But my destination was hours ahead, so I kept going. I was getting tired, so I rested frequently wherever I could. While I was going to rest at one such extreme turn, I saw something in the sky on my left. At first, I thought that it was a falling star or something, but I realized that it was one spherical source of light coming towards me. It grew bigger and shinier until it came right on top of me. I could not see anything ahead but bluish light. I could not move ahead, or maybe I do not know what happened exactly, but I felt like I was levitating in the air. I closed my eyes and when I opened them, I was inside a room with blue walls … or maybe … maybe it was a white room with blue lights. A buzzing sound filled my ears and I felt like I was in a hospital's ICU. I could not move, but I could see what was right in front of me. My peripheral vision was totally blurred. I was strapped to some sort of bed that was in an upright position. A door slid open in the wall, and an orange-coloured creature entered. It had three lidless eyes and two long, thick fingers on each of the four limbs, and walked like a human on two legs. Its large eyes were oval shaped and as it came closer to me I noticed something like plasma floating inside its eyes. I couldn't move but trust me, Major, if I had the chance I would have jumped out of the place. For what happened next was horrible. The orange thing produced a long and thin needle out of one of its fingers and brought the tip closer to my eyes. I wanted to close them but realized that my eyelids could not move either.'

The Major did not seem moved at all.

'What happened after that?' he asked.

'I don't know. Everything went black and when I could see again, I found myself in this restricted area. Except, I did not know that it was a restricted area.'

'That's your story?'

'Yes, major. That's exactly as I remember it,' Tushar said confidently. 'Wait!'

'What?'

'I think I can prove it.'

'How?'

'When I was in the blue room, I was still wearing my action cam. I had not paused or stopped the recording. I never got the chance, actually. It was still recording when I woke up in your restricted area. It went on till the batteries died,' Tushar said excitedly.

The major got up from his seat and walked out of the room without saying anything. Tushar felt nervous. A few minutes later the door opened and the major marched into the room.

'How long did you say you were inside that blue room?' the major asked without caring to sit down.

'The time by my watch said eight in the morning. When I woke up, it was eight thirty.' Tushar recollected.

'And when did you start recording your video?'

'I think… seven-forty-ish…'

'Hmmm…'

Tushar got anxious and he stared at the major as he held out Tushar's GoPro action camera. He pressed on few buttons and a video started playing.

'The video started at 7.43 a.m. and in the beginning, was a time-lapse view of the valley…' the major said as the video played on the screen.

'Yes, that is exactly where I saw the lights,' Tushar exclaimed.

Major paused the video and said, 'The time is 7:57. Do you want to see what happened next?'

Tushar nervously nodded his head. The major played the video from there and all he could see was a blue screen for the next twenty-nine minutes. Finally, at the thirtieth minute the blue screen on the video was replaced by a frame of the army's restricted area. Since the camera was mounted on Tushar's chest, it kept turning here and there along with Tushar. The major paused the video.

‘Time should be exactly 8:30 am. I don’t know what you witnessed but your video camera was recording a blue screen for thirty minutes. It is strange, but that will not serve as evidence. I am sorry but we cannot let you go.’ He said and left the room as Tushar wept.

He was a captive for the second time that day.

We had the Naidu Niwas to ourselves that night. Sharanya loved the palace. In fact, she loved and accepted everything that I loved, and that was the reason why she was so special to me. I had been touring the Telugu and Tamil belt, looking for adventure. Recording supernatural activities was my thing, and till date I had spent nights in ninety-five haunted spots. Sharanya had not been keeping well for some time, so she was staying back with her parents in Hyderabad. Now, after eight months of rest, she had joined me on my adventure in Guntur's notorious haunted house.

During daytime, a maid came to help with the cleaning of the house. It was huge and old and needed a lot of looking after. However, the maid left the house before sunset for she feared the wrath of the spirits that haunted the place. The woman never ran out of tales and rumours about the haunted house.

We had spent three days and three nights in the mansion, but noticed nothing out of the ordinary. On the fourth day, the maid seemed pretty tense and was clumsy with her duties. I was sure it had something to do with the resident ghost. I put down the newspaper and looked at the maid. She was sweeping the same spot on an already perfectly clean floor.

'Chinnama,' I said, 'if you clean any more, you might rub the tile off the floor. Is there something bothering you today?' I asked.

She gave me a tense look. The very next moment we heard a knock on the door followed by a voice. 'Mr Subbaraju, are you

home?' I recognized it immediately. It was Vedavyas Tanthry, the priest from the nearby Hanuman temple. He was fondly known as Vedu, and was almost perfectly round with tanned skin and a broad forehead that always carried a vertical streak of thirunaamam.

I opened the door and welcomed him, 'Please come in, Vedu.'

'Thank you Mr Subbaraju. I hope you are doing well,' He said while stepping inside. He was bare-chested, with just a piece of white silk over his shoulders.

'We have had a pleasant stay, no strange occurrences whatsoever,' I said confidently.

'Well, of course, I see that you have succeeded to pass the first three days. But there is something about the ghost that I wished to tell you. That's why I came all the way.'

I sensed another warning. I asked, 'And that would be?'

'I have not been able to sleep ever since I gave you the keys to this dreaded place because—'

'—of the mosquitoes? I know. They've been robbing me of sleep too,' I interrupted and chuckled.

'That's not funny, Mr Subbaraju. Ever since the day I met you, I have been getting pidakala.' He shuddered as he said it.

'Pidakala?' I asked, unable to understand the Telugu word, being a Tamilian.

'Yes, bad dreams. Moreover, since the day you moved in here, the dreams have gotten worse and I have not slept in three nights. I think I see him, you and your wife. These are bad omens—which you do not believe in, of course.' He was already sweating in the heat.

I asked Sharanya to make kaapi for the exhausted priest. She and the maid went inside the kitchen. On the way, Chinamma stumbled and fell on the floor. Embarrassed, she got up and moved into the kitchen.

'I do not know why she is so clumsy today.'

'Because she knows that tonight is amavaasi!' he hissed like a serpent.

'So?'

'It's a moonless night, when the ghosts are at their strongest.'

'Oh, Vedu. Dear old, Vedu! Why do you keep telling me such stories? You get all excited but then nothing will happen at night.'

The maid brought the kaapi and each of us took a tumbler full of the hot beverage which my wife had brought from her home.

‘You were saying?’ I asked the priest, who told us the story.

‘The house was built in the summer of 1950 by Ram Naidu as a wedding gift for his only daughter, Vidya. However, this did not go down well with his son Suryakanth. There was a rumour that Suryakanth had an affair with a Muslim woman. The rumour turned everyone in the family against him. In those days, inter-caste and inter-religious courtship was taboo. Suryakanth had become Suleiman for the girl he loved and Ram Naidu banished Suryakanth from the family.

‘A traditional wedding took place for Vidya at the nearby Hanuman temple, and all the guests were thereafter invited to the housewarming at her new home. However, Suryakanth was not invited.

‘After the wedding the couple was to spend their first night in Naidu Niwas. However, since it was amavasya, the astrologer suggested they refrain from sexual activities for the next three nights. All the close family members and friends were staying back at the house. It was a breezy, moonless night.

‘When the first rays of the sun dawned upon the mansion, nobody woke. There was absolute silence in the house. The milkman grew suspicious and called the neighbours to check. When they broke into the house, they found thirteen dead bodies. Each and every member of the family was dead including the bride, groom and Ram Naidu. There was no heir left alive except for Suryakanth, who did not die because he was not invited to the house. All eyes were on Suryakanth, for he had a motive. However, there was no proof. Someone had poisoned the entire

family's food or water.

'Suryakanth inherited everything. He married the girl he loved and moved into the house. Soon they had a baby together. However, he had taken to drinking when his family had abandoned him. He sold off most of the property in the city for money, which he used for drinking. He even started blaming his wife and baby for bringing him such ill fate and pushing him to kill off his family. He started believing that his child was possessed by the devil and ever since it was born, bad luck had fallen upon him.

'One night, the night of amavasya, when he lost all control over his rage, he raped and murdered his wife. Suryakanth did not let anyone know that he had killed his wife, and locked himself up in the house during the day time. He had so much rage inside that he started bringing women home on every night of amavasya. He would inflict pain and suffering upon them, until he would finally slash their throats or strangle them to death.

'People started saying that Suryakanth was possessed by some demonic spirit that made him kill his wife and they stayed away from the vicinity of the house. One night, a loud scream was heard. People called the police and when the officers arrived they found two dead bodies: one that of a naked Suryakanth and the other of some woman who was half-naked and lying on top of the dead man. A dozen other rotting dead bodies of women were found, including his wife's.

'The house was sealed and nobody dared go near it. It was locked forever,' the priest stopped and took a sip of his coffee.

'Just because some evil madman lived and died here does not mean that—' I was interrupted by the priest.

'However,' he licked his upper lip, cleared off the froth that had settled on the surface and spoke, 'for twenty years nothing happened here. The colours of the walls faded away, and the wooden frames began decaying. While more houses mushroomed in the vicinity. The small isolated village was developing into a bustling town. The tales of the evil man were being forgotten and the new settlers were not aware of the past. Naidu Niwas was reduced to an unwanted, empty house. But two years ago, the people of the area saw light in the upper window on a moonless night. Some claimed that they had heard shrieks and cries of a woman. The old stories were back. However, nobody had the courage to go and check. The same week, the stench of decay came from within the house and neighbours reported it. When the police broke into the house, they found rotting dead bodies of

more than two women in the house. Women had never been seen in this region before.

'Since then, there have been over twenty instances of the light being seen in the window. On an amavasya night, six dead bodies have been found there. The dead bodies were found exactly after the amavasya. I personally tied a sacred thread around the house to keep the evil trapped inside. A fakir also burnt some incense near the place to ward off the evil, since the villainous ghost just happened to be a convert.'

I honestly could not help laughing at that comment.

'Ghosts have religion too?'

'Please do not joke about the dead and the evil. Especially because tonight is amavasya. Nevertheless, we have not witnessed any encounters in the past six months, so some believe that the ghost has gone back to hell.' He ended his story.

'You never told me about the dead bodies,' I accused the pot-bellied priest. I glanced at Sharanya. She was pale with horror.

'I had warned you about the ghost,' Vedu defended himself.

'Yes, you said there was some ghost, but you never told me about the recent happenings.'

'I warned you that the ghost visits the place. You never listened, you kept mocking at me,' he cried.

'But why do these ignorant people warn only outsiders to stay away?' I asked as I had been told by quite a few people I met last week in the town.

'That is because Suryakanth only brought women from faraway areas. He never brought women from this region. Outsiders they all were!'

I asked Sharanya to rest because she looked tired and upset. After she left with the maid, I showed the priest to the door.

'If you want, you can stay at my house tonight. It is nearby. At least you can skip this night of amavasya,' Vedu offered. His eyes were red, filled with tears of regret and horror.

'That would not be necessary, Vedu. I do not believe in such legends. The man is dead. And if there's a killer, we'll take care of that. I have a gun and I know how to use it.' I smiled confidently.

Later that night

The sky was pitch black and thunder roared. Dogs howled outside. November rains were expected. Sharanya had gone off to sleep early. She had been upset after hearing the stories.

As far as I was concerned, I enjoyed the thrill of a scary story, even if it was too absurd to be true. There were so many loopholes. I took my torch and started walking through the length and breadth of the old house, inspecting every element in sight. Suddenly I heard the sound of glass shattering. It came from the staircase. I ran up the staircase. I was curious, not scared, of course. The house had two staircases, one was spiral and led to the terrace and the other one was a closed wooden one that led to the attic. The sound came from the one that led to the attic.

The attic was made of wood, and was totally dilapidated. The smell of wood and dust made it difficult to breathe. Using my torch, I took a dozen more steps until I spotted something on the floor. There was a square tile that had to be pulled in order to open to a passage. The tile had a small handle and a high tensile bronze bolt that locked it from outside. I unbolted it and I pulled it open and there was a narrow path to another compartment inside the attic of the house. It was pitch black below and smelled like pungent acid.

There was a weird pull that I felt in the small room, and it was of the repulsive kind. I crept in with the light from the torch illuminating the dark world. Upon placing my leg on the third or

fourth step, I felt as if I had stepped on something. It felt like broken glass. Indeed, it was broken glass. I aimed the beam at the step where I had found broken glass.

With the next step, I found more glass pieces. I looked around the room with my torch and found a broken window. So, that was the sound I had heard. But who would have broken it five minutes ago? There was no other passage to the attic, and if someone had broken in, he or she must still be inside. I went back into the attic carefully, as my heart pounded faster with every step I took. I reached the attic and my foot was finally on the damp wooden floor. I was surprised to see that there was a wall right in front of me. And that was when I heard a loud cry. It was the sound of a woman and came from the bedroom. It was Sharanya.

The shriek shook me and I rushed towards the stairs. The trapdoor had been knocked down and I thought that it had fallen accidentally. I flew up the stairs and pushed hard but the door did not move at all. It was locked from above. But who had done that?

I pushed again and again. It was getting darker and my breathing got heavier. I struck the door with my shoulders but in vain. My wife's shrieks were getting louder and were accompanied by constant cries for help. I tried harder. I was exhausting myself. My hands were trembling and the torch fell. The bulb broke and I was surrounded by darkness. The broken glass cut my heel and I cried in frustration because I was unable to help my wife.

'Sharanya!'

As more blood dripped from my foot, I started seeing shining particles in the darkness, the kind you see when you are about to lose consciousness. I lost my balance and all I remember is falling down.

I cursed the devil that haunted the house and the demon Vedu had warned me about.

When I regained consciousness, my wife's cries had stopped. Or maybe I had gone deaf. I do not remember clearly, but then as I blinked, I felt myself rising up in the air from the dusty floor. I was moving up and upon reaching a certain height, I was moving forward… I was floating in the air. I could not see anything clearly, everything was a blur.

The following morning, I woke up and found myself in a different house. A picture of Lord Venkateswara of Tirupati with his consorts, Sridevi and Bhudevi, smiled at me from the wall in front of me.

'How are you feeling?' said a friendly voice, it was Vedu.

'I… I… what happened?' I asked in confusion, my eyes looking for my wife or the news of her.

'Calm down. Everything is alright.'

I sat up in bed. 'No, it is not. I heard her screaming for help. I was trapped.'

'Yes, we also heard her screams. I and some others were vigilant last night. We got to the house in time to save your wife and you. She's in my wife's room, resting.'

'Did you find the ghost?' I asked.

'Ghost? Far worse than a ghost. He was an evil maniac. What else could you expect from someone who had grown up watching rape and murder?'

'I don't understand.'

'Every fold of skin on his face, every twitch of the eye, and every vocal sound produced from his throat was reminiscent of his father—the old Suryakanth. We were all shocked to see a replica of the dead man, and at first, we thought it was the ghost. Little did we know, that the new series of murders were being committed by his son.'

The greatest evils lie in the human mind. The evil man's son had grown to become a serial rapist and murderer. He was taken by the police and the house was razed a few months later. I still do not believe in ghosts—but I will never forget that we had spent nights in a house that sheltered a demon.

—K.P. Subbaraju Rao, November 1989

A Possession in Belman

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is a mental disorder widely popularized by horror and serial-killer films. Of course, possession and exorcism are equally popular concepts exploited by filmmakers. I still remember watching Manichitratazhu (the 1992 Malayalam flick which was later remade as Bhool Bhulaiyya in Hindi). I had goosebumps during the climax when Nagavalli was exorcised by the parapsychologist using ancient techniques while, theoretically, following scientific principles of psychiatry. I believe that demonic or spirit possession is nothing but a curious case of dissociative identity disorder. However, if you go to Belman, a little village in the Udupi district of Karnataka, they will disagree.

I spent the final five days of 2018 at a relative's ancestral home in the village of Belman. The house was at least a hundred years old, located in the middle of the woods. The particular house was known to attract the spirits of the forest and the person who owned the place was an aged priest called Nageshwara Bhat, who also performed exorcisms. There was no network, for cell phones and the internet were non-existent in the region surrounding the house.

The nights were lively with ambient sounds of insects, owls, bats and wild animals howling in the woods. Serpents were considered holy and, therefore, worshipped with milk offerings at sight. There were many ghost stories related to the region. In

short, it was the perfect getaway for a writer working on a book of horror stories. Stories about demonic and spirit possession were so common in the region that every other house in the village had a story to share. Even though I would argue that possession was nothing but a case mental illness, the people would not budge. For them, it was all real and they would seek a solution in sorcery and exorcisms. While I was working on my manuscript, I came to know about a real ghost story that happened in a house located in the vicinity. It was a house in which the lifeless bodies of a twenty-two-year-old girl and nineteen-year-old boy were found in the attic.

Around twenty years ago, there lived a woman named Shaista. She lived in the village, in an old house, with her husband and three sons. They had a couple of goats and spoke Byary Tulu. However, on the night of Nagapournami of 1998, Shaista suddenly woke up from her sleep and started uttering senseless words in a dialect spoken only by the Brahmin community of Udupi. It was strange that a woman who had never set foot in a temple suddenly started chanting mantras in Sanskrit and performed brahminical rituals at her home. The poor old husband was confused. But before he could do anything, Shaista sprang out of the door like a wild animal. She did not mention where she was going and without any torch or lantern, she disappeared into the thick woods. Haji, her husband, and Qamil, their eldest, went out looking for her with lanterns, while the middle son stayed back at home looking after the youngest.

'I think we should seek the help of Nageshwara Bhat,' Qamil suggested.

'Yes, let's go tell him. At this hour, only he can help us.'

Whenever there was a case of possession or black magic, people of the village went to Nageshwara. Haji arrived at Nageshwara's door and started knocking on it. The priest opened the door. He was about fifty back then and had a stout frame and long legs. His eyes were perfectly round and dark.

'What happened, sahib?' asked the priest as he tightened his fingers around his poonool (sacred thread).

'My wife… she is possessed by some Brahmin's spirit.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'She was alright until sunset, but suddenly got up and started speaking Sanskrit. She even chanted mantras and performed rituals.' The anxious Haji revealed. 'She just ran out of the house uttering something in rage. I could not bear to look into her blood-red eyes.'

'Hmmm… if she is indeed possessed, we must find out who it is. That will help us.' Nageshwara said, 'What was the last thing she did before lying down?'

'She was preparing dinner.'

'Did she go out alone or with someone?'

'I was not home at the time, so, I do not know,' Haji said.

Qamil added, 'Ammi had been to the market. While coming back she had stopped by Shreya akka's place to pay her condolences for her husband's death.'

'That's it. She went to the house where a Brahmin died yesterday. It must be his spirit that entered her. We must go there at once,' Nageshwara declared as he left with the two men for the little house on the other side of the woods.

As they passed through the woods in the night, they could hear footsteps other than their own. The additional footsteps also carried the jingling sound of anklets. Whenever they would stop to listen, the sound would also cease. This went on until they reached Shreya's little house. Some people called it Pilidekke house.

Despite having two floors, it was not spread out like the ancestral house of Nageshwara Bhat. Shreya's house had a wooden ceiling over the two rooms on the ground floor and an attic on the first floor. Just like any other house in the region, the roof above the attic was covered with Mangalore tiles from the nineteenth century. One or two tiles were missing from the set, and one could see the light of the moon entering through the gap and creating a rectangular shape on the wooden floor of the attic.

It was risky as thieves could easily remove the adjacent tiles and sneak in with the help of a rope.

Now that her husband had passed away, Shreya was left all alone in that secluded house. Nageshwara knocked on the door.

'Who is it?' Shreya asked.

'It is I, Nageshwara Bhat,' said the priest.

She opened the door and out came the tender looking twenty-two-year-old widow of Shashidhar Narayan. Her small eyes sparkled under the light of the moon.

'What happened, Nageshwara ji?' she asked.

'Did you have any disturbances here? Did you happen to see Shaista by any chance?' Nageshwara inquired.

Shreya looked at the two men who were standing on either side of the priest and then said, 'No. She was here in the evening but left shortly after passing on her condolences.'

'Very well.' The priest warned, 'Please close all the doors and secure the place. Do not open the doors unless it is me. Do you understand?'

'Yes, but what happened?'

'Nothing. Just do as I say.' They turned around. 'Come on, we have to look for her in the woods.'

Shreya closed the door behind her as the men set out for the woods. Suddenly, Qamil stopped and called out to his father from behind.

'I think one of us should stay here and guard the house. Don't you think two people are enough to look for Mother in the woods?'

'Yes, that's very wise of you. You keep guard. In case she comes here, you yell out at the top of your voice and we will come,' the priest said.

'Very well.' Qamil said and went back to the house. He sat outside on the elevated ground.

The older men vanished into the forest searching for the possessed woman.

Inside the quiet little house, Shreya curled up on her cotton bed and tried to sleep. The emptiness was not new because her husband would mostly be away on pilgrimage. Only this time, she knew for a fact that her husband was never coming back. She closed her eyes. Suddenly she heard footsteps outside. She got up from her bed, nervously looking towards the window. Someone was lurking there.

'Shreya…' hissed the male voice.

It was a familiar voice and suddenly her heart started thumping anxiously. She did not expect to hear that voice so soon.

'Shreya…' it hissed again.

Shreya trembled and went to the door to open it. The moment she opened it, something pushed her away and entered the house. The door slammed shut after that.

'How did you… how did you manage to come back?' the twenty-two-year-old widow asked.

'I found a good excuse to ward off those superstitious old men,' said the young man as he came closer.

'Qamil… my darling… what if they come back and see you here?' Shreya said nervously as she held the man's hand.

'I have the perfect excuse today, dear.' He kissed Shreya's forehead.

'How?'

'They think that Ammi is possessed by your husband's spirit. She ran off into the woods and now they are looking for her. I have been asked to guard the house from outside… you know, in case

Ammi shows up,' Qamil explained. 'So now we get to spend some time together.'

'And if they show up at the door and find you inside?' Shreya asked.

'You can tell them that you heard sounds from the attic and that you called me to check what it was about.'

'Brilliant! So why are we wasting time talking?' the widow said with a mischievous smirk on her face.

Shreya and Qamil went inside the tiny bedroom and started kissing each other with wild passion.

'Finally, that husband of yours won't bother us,' Qamil said while kissing the widow's neck.

'Yes, I never liked him anyway. He was too old for me. He would have been forty next month. He never made me happy,' Shreya revealed.

'Don't worry, now I will make you happy forever.'

Just when they were getting intimate, Shreya heard something again. She pushed Qamil away and started looking towards the window.

'Did you hear that?' she asked.

'What?'

'I heard footsteps.'

'You think it could be Abbu?' Qamil said as he started pulling his kurta back on.

Then they heard it again—footsteps, but they were not coming from outside. The sound was coming from the attic. Shreya and

Qamil looked at each other in shock.

'Must be a cat or mouse,' Qamil tried to reason.

However, the footsteps got louder as if someone was pacing. There was occasional gurgling, like someone clearing their throat, and it was quite a familiar sound for the young widow.

'That sounded just like Shashidhar,' Shreya said with wide eyes.

'I'll go check the attic,' Qamil said, getting out of bed.

'I will come with you.'

Qamil and Shreya held hands and walked up the wooden stairs to the attic. It was filled with old utensils, furniture, rope, and other items, only a few of which were visible in the darkness. The moonlight coming through the broken roof allowed them to see only some parts. Qamil noticed that quite a few tiles were missing and a thick rope had been lowered from the gap. Someone had entered the attic like a thief.

'We know you are here. Come out,' Qamil called out nervously.

Footsteps were heard from a far corner of the attic, which was darker than the rest. Something was approaching them.

'The two of you will not be spared for the sin you have committed,' a male voice said.

There was fear in the eyes of Qamil and Shreya, for it was the voice of her dead husband, Shashidhar.

'You thought I would let you both live together peacefully…' said the dead man's voice.

A shadow started appearing on the floor under the roof from where tiles had been removed. Two steps more and the person would be under the light of the moon, revealing his face.

'I will not let you live peacefully…' it said. 'This night will be your last night together…'

Shreya and Qamil were shocked to see the person in front of them. It was Shaista.

'I will kill the two of you tonight…' the possessed Shaista paused to roll her eyeballs inwards, and then whispered, 'just like you killed me last night, dear Shreya.'

The haunting of Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Mumbai

Mohit and Yamini had two things in common: they loved long drives and were passionate about wildlife. They had come to Mumbai on work trip and on the last day they decided to check out the famous Sanjay Gandhi National Park. As always, they rented a jeep and went in to check out the wilderness hidden inside the bustling city of Mumbai. They completed their safari by sunset and were on their way back to the wildlife park's main gate.

'Why don't you switch on the headlights?' asked Yamini.

'I can see well,' Mohit said a little too confidently.

Just then a hitchhiker appeared on the path in front of them and Mohit had to hit the brake to avoid a collision. The tyres screeched to a halt, as dust rose around the vehicle.

'What the hell?' Yamini yelled at her friend.

'Someone was standing on the road,' Mohit said looking bewildered.

'There was no one, dude.'

'I'm sure I saw a man with a backpack.'

'I told you to switch on the headlights.'

Mohit turned on the lights. The path before him was illuminated and he could see for quite a long distance ahead.

'There is no sign of any person, living or dead,' Yamini remarked, 'Now, let's go before a leopard tears us apart.'

Mohit started driving but his mind was filled with doubt. After moving ahead for a while they saw a man wearing a black t-shirt with a backpack at a distance, asking for a lift. Mohit stopped the car.

'Can you please drop me at the gate? I'm a little hurt,' the man said as he limped toward the jeep.

Mohit checked with Yamini, who nodded her approval.

'Sure,' Mohit said. 'Hop in!'

The man settled on the backseat with his backpack next to him. He seemed relieved after a long and tiring day in the woods.

'I'm Sunny.'

'Mohit.'

'Yamini.'

'Where are you guys headed?' Sunny asked.

'We are headed towards our hotel in Santa Cruz,' Yamini revealed.

'Oh cool! Then you guys can probably drop me on the way. I live in Chakala,' Sunny said.

'We really don't know where that is,' Mohit said apologetically. 'We are actually from Gurgaon. Here for some work.'

'No prob! I will show you the way. I know a shortcut.'

The hitchhiker kept talking throughout the drive. He would only pause when they had to take a left or right on the road. Yamini had stopped listening to the chatterbox by plugging in her earphones. But poor Mohit had no other option but to bear the non-stop yammering. Finally, they arrived at a narrow lane and Sunny patted Mohit's back.

'There… that one,' Sunny said pointing towards a house. 'That's my place. You can drop me there.'

Mohit stopped the jeep in front of the house. Sunny jumped out as if he was not hurt at all.

'Wasn't he limping earlier?' Yamini whispered into Mohit's ear.

Sunny stood at the gate and instructed, 'Now, just go straight, take a right and you will be back on the highway.'

'Thanks. We will manage. Take care, Sunny,' Mohit said as he started the jeep.

'Goodbye!' Sunny said.

'Bye!' Yamini said as the jeep drove off.

Mohit pushed at the accelerator.

'What a chatterbox, yaar!' Yamini laughed.

'Yeah, I'm never picking up a hitchhiker again,' Mohit confessed.

'Oh shit!' Yamini said while looking at the backseat.

'What?'

'The guy forgot his bag in the backseat.'

Mohit looked at the bag in the rear-view mirror. 'Crap!'

'We should go return it.'

'Yes.'

Mohit turned the jeep around and drove back to where they had dropped Sunny. Mohit got out of the jeep with the backpack and rang the doorbell. The light inside the house turned on and a middle-aged woman wearing a nightie came out.

'Yes?'

'Hi. We are looking for Sunny…'

'Oh! Why on earth would you be looking for him?'

'He forgot his bag!' Mohit said, raising the bag.

'How did you get that?' the woman said.

'We gave him a lift but he forgot to lift his backpack from the back of our jeep,' Mohit said with a smile.

The woman did not seem to get the puns as she simply stared at him in disbelief.

‘It’s impossible…’ she said in a low voice. ‘Sunny Fernandes, my brother. He went camping at the national park fifteen years ago. He died there.’

The Visitor at the National Library

Komolika Mukherjee was recently married and had moved to Kolkata with her husband, Paritosh Mukherjee. She found work as a librarian at the National Library shortly after she moved to the capital city. She was excited, being an ardent reader who loved spending time at libraries.

Due to the arrival of the new stock, old books were to be archived alphabetically, for which she had to stay back until 8 p.m. She had informed her husband about it and he had asked her to give him a call once she was done with her work so that he could come and pick her up. He had planned on taking her out to dinner later that night.

So, here she was inside the library arranging a pile of books from a cart on a shelf that was marked 'S'. The shelf was almost filled. She placed one big, fat book in the end and was about to move to the next one when she came across a thin, regional book with its title in Telugu. She could not recognize the alphabets. Tired, she simply placed it on the shelf, hoping nobody would notice. She pushed the cart and moved to the next shelf. That was she when heard something fall to the floor behind her. She turned and noticed that the thin book was on the floor.

She felt strange. She looked around but there was no one else. Maybe it was not placed properly, she thought. She picked it up and placed it back on the same shelf and walked to the next one.

The book fell down again. She turned back and sighed.

‘Hello? Anybody there?’ Komolika checked.

There was no response but then she felt someone’s heavy breathing right behind her. She quickly turned but there was no one around. The sound also stopped.

‘Is this some kind of a joke? Please stop it!’

There was no response.

Komolika Mukherjee sighed, picked up the book and placed it back on the shelf when, suddenly, all the books fell on her. She dodged the books, but fell down.

‘That’s it!’ She said angrily. ‘Come out you filthy bastard!’ she said and walked over to the next row. But to her surprise, there was nobody there. She walked back to the previous row and stood in front of the shelf the books had fallen out of. She looked at the books on the floor and then she looked at the small book with the Telugu title, which was in her hand.

‘You…’ she said slamming the book back on the same rack, ‘are going to stay right there!’

While pulling her hand back, she accidentally pushed the adjacent thick book on the floor, revealing a pair of grey eyes staring right into Komolika’s. The newly appointed librarian recoiled in horror and hit her back against the shelf behind her, sending all the books crashing down on her head. Some of them were really thick and hurt more than she would have expected.

The translucent figure of a pale white woman came out through the shelf and passed through Komolika’s body.

Komolika’s heart almost stopped. She got up and ran out of the library as fast as she could. She did not even sign the register. In fact, she never returned to the library. She never visited any library after what she had experienced that night.

Some say it was the ghost of Lady Metcalf, who was very particular about putting things in their rightful place. Others say the library was haunted by the ghost of a student who died there. Regardless, many avoid the library at night.

The Bronze Soldier of Warangal

Inspired by a news article

Vaishnavi Rai was excited to live in the old collector's house. She took charge of the office three days ago and was taking her time to settle down in the new house. Everything was already well arranged in the hundred-year-old house and Bhaleram, the servant, had retired to his quarters, which were right outside the main building. Bhaleram had been serving the occupants of the house for the past fifteen years and had seen four masters during that time. Vaishnavi was the fifth government official that he was serving.

Vaishnavi's husband was in Kolkata that night, on official duty, and therefore she had the whole house to herself.

She watched the news but eventually dozed off as the debate was reduced to the panellists screaming at each other. A few hours into the night, Vaishnavi woke up suddenly and realized that the television and the ceiling fan had been switched off. In fact, there was no electricity in the house. She looked for her phone, but it was not nearby. She realized that she had kept it in her bedroom after talking to her husband. Sighing, she got up from the couch and started walking towards the bedroom. That was when she heard the sound of furniture being dragged around on the floor above. She quickly went to the bedroom, collected her

cell phone and, using its light, walked up the staircase and arrived at the room upstairs. The room was clean and had some old furniture and books. She had not been inside that room before. She moved the light from one corner of the room to the other and saw something that looked like a man's head. She could make out the shape, but it was hiding behind the curtain over the door that opened to the veranda.

'Who is that?' she asked, pointing the light at the person hiding behind the curtain.

She walked towards the door, cautiously.

'If you are a thief, then you better get the hell out before I call security,' she warned as she approached the curtain.

Vaishnavi could clearly see the head through the gap between the two curtains. She took a deep breath and then parted them. She was shocked to see what was standing there. It was a bronze statue of a soldier. Vaishnavi could not control her laughter.

'You got me!' she said to the statue and smiled, feeling stupid.

Vaishnavi turned and walked back to the staircase. She went to the living room and called her servant on the cell phone.

'Why is there no electricity here?' Vaishnavi asked.

'The light and fan are working in my quarters. I think the fuse must have blown,' The servant said.

'Can you come and fix it now?'

'Yes, madam. I will be right there.'

A few minutes later, Bhaleram came knocking on the door. 'What happened?' Vaishnavi asked as soon as she opened it.

‘There is some sort of problem. The fuse wire is fine. We will have to wait till morning, unfortunately. If you want, you can stay in my quarters and I will sleep outside in the garden.’

‘It’s okay, Bhaleram. I will manage.’

She was about to close the door when she stopped halfway and asked out of curiosity, ‘By the way, Bhaleram…’

‘Yes, madam?’

‘I saw a bronze statue on the first floor. Whose is it?’

‘Bronze statue?’ the servant looked confused.

‘Yes, of a medieval soldier. Is it part of the house or did it belong to the previous occupants?’

‘I’m sure there was never a bronze statue in this house, madam. Maybe it is some new addition that came recently. I am not aware of it.’

‘Well, okay. Goodnight, Bhaleram.’

‘Goodnight, madam!’ He said and left.

Vaishnavi closed the door and locked it from inside. She was not convinced by the servant’s claim, but did not mind having the bronze statue in the house. She planned to examine it closely in the morning, but the moment she turned around her eyes widened in horror.

Right in front of her, in that dark room, stood the bronze statue of the soldier, staring right at her.

Sakshi Yadav and Harsh Bagri loved each other. They were residents of Rajendra Place and had studied in the same school. They went to the same college as well. However, both of them belonged to different communities and came from different economic background. This made it extremely difficult for them to meet in their neighbourhood. They could not even talk to each other in college as there were chances of being spotted by Sakshi's cousin. They could not risk that.

Sakshi had bank coaching classes on Friday evenings, which she would skip and instead go to the Rose Garden in Hauz Khas. There she would meet Harsh. The Rose Garden was one of the infamous lover's points of Delhi. It was a safe place in which she could spend some intimate moments with her secret boyfriend.

However, on one Friday evening, she had guests who would be staying the night and so she had to come home early. The two decided to meet somewhere closer to Rajendra Place and Harsh suggested Bhuli Bhatiyari ka Mahal.

Sakshi boarded a Blue Line Metro heading towards Noida and got down at Karol Bagh. Harsh had been waiting for her at the exit gate on his Bajaj Pulsar. Before getting on his bike, she had completely covered her face with a stole. They took off and reached the local lover's point in another fifteen minutes. As they entered the historical site, they read an engraving that read: Warning—Do not stay inside after sunset!

'It's already 4.30 p.m.,' Sakshi said looking at her watch. 'I have to leave early anyway. Shalini Aunty and her family will be arriving soon.'

'It will be quick. I will drop you home in case you get late,' Harsh offered.

'No way! Don't even come anywhere near my house. They will kill us both.'

'How long do you plan to keep our relationship hidden from everyone? One day it will come out in the open.'

'The day I become financially independent. Can't you wait till then?' Sakshi asked. 'Besides, both of us will have to work in order to live together.'

'We can run my shop in the market,' Harsh said.

'I did not study so hard to sit in a textile shop. I want work in the banking sector. And I also want you to look for a decent job,' Sakshi said sternly. 'I cannot even imagine a husband who sits in a shop, sorry!'

Harsh was disappointed but did not say anything because he did not want to ruin her mood. His hormones were raging and he wanted to hold and kiss her.

They strolled hand-in-hand on the path paved for walking. Both sides had tall bushes, mostly thorny. At a far corner, they could see some old structures. Those were part of a fourteenth-century monument built by Ferozeshah Tughlaq. The Bhuli Bhatiyari ka Mahal was a sarai for the royal hunting parties. The forest surrounding it was once dense but had been reduced to thorny bushes and a few dusty trees. Now, the place was perfect for those looking to satisfy their carnal desires behind the bushes or inside the sarais. Sometimes, guards caught people in the act and made a fortune by blackmailing lovers in the name of fines and rules. Harsh spotted a small broken structure behind a large bush.

'There, let's go there,' He exclaimed and ran off track.

They entered the ruined structure and started kissing. They had all the privacy they wanted. Harsh reached under his girlfriend's top and then started moving down, below the navel. Sakshi spat on his hand and pulled it away in pain.

'Why did you do that?' She asked agitatedly.

'Do what?'

'You know it very well Harsh. We have set some limits. Don't forget them!'

'For how long?' he asked, disappointed.

'As long as it takes for us to get married.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Nothing. I just said that because we can't predict the future. What if our families don't agree or one of us changes our mind or dies?'

'Don't utter nonsense. I can see the future.' He paused to look into her eyes and then continued, 'And in future, we are together as husband and wife.'

She smiled and kissed him on the lips. They started making out again when, suddenly, Sakshi stopped again. She started looking around.

'What happened now?' Harsh asked.

'Did you hear that?'

'Hear what?'

'Footsteps!'

'No, I did not hear anything. Now, can we please get back to what we were doing?'

'All you want to do is kiss and touch me, isn't it?' Sakshi accused.

'I'm sorry.'

Harsh moved forward to kiss her again but then something kept him from moving. Something or someone was holding him back. It was a security guard's lathi, which was placed under his neck by an old guard.

'Why are you still here?' the old security guard asked.

'Sir… We were just leaving,' Harsh said meekly.

The security guard appeared very pale and fragile with age.

'Don't you know this place is haunted? You should not stay here after sunset. Didn't you read the warning?'

'Sorry, sir. We are just leaving,' Sakshi said, almost breaking into tears. She held Harsh's hand tightly.

'Don't blame the old watchman later and say that I did not give you a chance.'

'We are going.' Harsh said as they left. They started walking back to the pathway. Sakshi kept turning around. The old watchman stood at his position, staring at the couple as they were walking away. As they exited the thick patch of bushes, she saw the old man break into a burst of high-pitched laughter. A thorn pierced her right heel and she cried in pain and stopped to remove it.

'Come out, then we can remove it,' Harsh suggested.

'It's alright. I've got it,' she said as she pulled out the tiny thorn and threw it away. While getting up she remarked, 'Why is that old man laughing like a crazy devil?'

'Doesn't matter. Let's get out,' Harsh said impatiently.

They started walking again. She could hear the laughter but when she turned back again, she was surprised. The old man was not there, but the sound of his laughter continued.

'Harsh?' she said as she stepped back on the paved path.

'Yes?'

'The old man's gone.'

'Really?'

'Yes! But I can still hear his laughter.'

'He must be around, must have just walked out of sight,' Harsh said taking a peek through the bush. He caught his girlfriend's hand and they jogged towards the entrance.

Ten minutes later, they arrived at the entrance. A guard was standing with a cane right outside, as if there was a line which he could not cross. He stared at the young lovers who were coming his way.

'What were you doing inside after sunset?' the guard, who was hardly twenty-five, asked.

'We got lost,' Harsh lied.

'Oh! I'm glad you people are safe. Youngsters, especially couples, have had a bad time here after sunset.'

'Yes, that old guard told us that the place was haunted,' Harsh said.

'What guard?'

'You know, that old man with almost no teeth and all,' Sakshi tried to describe the man they had met inside the ruin.

'It appears you have already encountered the one who haunts this place in the night!' the guard said. 'Bakhtiar was one of the first guards here. One evening, at about 5.30 p.m., he caught a couple defacing the historic property. He threatened to get them arrested and the rude couple got into a fight with him. When other guards came to know about the fight, and rushed to stop them. But when they reached the spot, there was no one. The couple had fled the scene and some blood was found splattered on the ground. To this day, nobody has found the old man's body. His ghost cannot tolerate couples who are rude to him.'

The guard stopped and looked at Sakshi, who looked terrified. Harsh held her hand more tightly than ever. They had just

escaped a ghost.

'Don't blame the old watchman later and say that I did not give you a chance.'

There Are No Ghosts in De Monte Colony

'De Monte was a wealthy Portuguese businessman who settled here. He was a devout Christian and resided with his mentally unstable wife. They owned several acres of prime real estate in what are some of the poshest areas of the city today,' Elsa explained as she walked over the rubble-covered path leading towards the abandoned house.

Kamraj did not blink once while listening to the story of the place where Elsa was taking him. Frogs were croaking in deep baritones, blowing the occasional trumpet to the orchestra of the crickets.

Elsa looked at her friend and continued explaining, 'De Monte's son, who was about twenty-two, was preparing to leave for Portugal when he died under mysterious circumstances in this house. De Monte was left a broken-hearted man and entrusted the property to Archdiocese of Madras-Mylapore. The place was taken by many in subsequent years but nobody ever stayed here for long because of the hauntings that they experienced.' She paused to look at the main door of the house and then introduced it with grandeur, 'And this is the door beyond which lies a world of horror!'

'Like you really want me to believe it?' Kamraj chuckled.

'Well, even I don't believe all that crap about hauntings. It's probably a rumour created by the trustees to keep government

agencies away from acquiring the property. Who knows?' Elsa added as she pushed open the door.

Elsa and Kamraj went inside and looked around with their flashlights. Kamraj took some pictures too.

'What kind of occurrences have been reported?' Kamraj asked.

'The usual ones: cries in the middle of the night, the front door opening on its own, mysterious shadows falling on the sidewalk, animals coming in and disappearing.'

'It's just another hoax!'

'People say that there was a security guard here a few years ago. However, he was found dead in the morning,' Elsa said. 'He died of suffocation.'

'Is there any proof? I mean, like newspaper reports or something?'

'Naah! Nothing at all.'

'Hoax! Let's go, there is nothing in here!'

'Are you scared?' Elsa teased.

'No.' Kamraj laughed. 'This is just another ruined property with nothing in it. I wanted to check out some real haunted places, you know. Something with historical significance. In fact, I think the whole story about De Monte itself is made-up.'

'Probably. We can try the Theosophical Society tomorrow. I will ask my dad to get us permission for our visit.'

'Cool!'

Elsa dropped Kamraj at his hotel and then drove back to her home in T-Nagar. Her parents lived in Choolameidu, while she lived independently in her own apartment. She was very tired after a whole day of sightseeing. She could tell from Kamraj's face that he had still not found the 'haunted place' he was looking for. She took a shower and then went to sleep without having dinner. As was her habit, she did not bolt the main door before sleeping. She would simply lock it because only her parents and boyfriend had spare keys.

Late in the night, at 11.55 p.m., she woke up to a rustling noise coming from the living room.

'Who's there?' she shouted from the bedroom.

There was no response but the rustling continued. Elsa got up and switched on the light. She walked across the hall and then entered the living room. The light switch was on the far end, near the main door. The light from her bedroom was enough for her to make her way through the living room. As she marched towards the switches, she passed by the large antique mirror, which was

placed near the sofa. She thought she saw something in it, and took two steps back. What she saw in the mirror shocked her. In place of her reflection, she saw a white man with long brown hair staring back at her from the mirror. He had bright red eyes that were dilated. She stared at the mirror in horror, unable to move. She tried to walk away but her feet would not respond. It was as if she had lost control of her body. Something had taken over.

The next morning Elsa's house was quiet. Her phone and doorbell rang occasionally, but none were answered. Kamraj was worried and so were Elsa's parents. When her father arrived to check on her, he opened the door with the spare key. When he entered, he saw Elsa lying on the sofa with the pillow against her face. She was holding the sofa's pillow with her hand and when he moved it, he discovered that she had suffocated to death.

A Night Out in Sanjay Van

Venky, Alia, Meghna and Zafar were camping in Delhi. They had lit a campfire to ward off the cold and had finished a crate of beer in two hours—the third crate was still in the car. Zafar had brought marinated chicken and skewers. All four of them worked at a call centre in Gurgaon and each one came from a different part of the country.

Venky suggested they tell horror from their hometowns.

Alia went first.

'I was born and brought up in Agra and when people hear the name of the city, only one thing comes to the mind: The Taj Mahal. But let me tell you that within the walls of the fort of Agra, there lies a ghastly secret. Not many people know that the fort is haunted. Inside the building, one can hear the cries of women in the night. It is believed that the Mughals used to bring the wives and children of their enemies there and burn them alive!' Alia narrated as everyone looked at her in horror, 'Those helpless people would burn to death, and their shrieks can still be heard after sunset.'

'How cruel!' Meghna remarked. 'And we keep praising Shah Jahan for building the Taj for his true love!'

'That's pure crap!' Zafar said as he pulled a skewer from over their campfire. As he removed individual pieces of roasted chicken and set them on paper plates, he reasoned, 'It is just propaganda. Malign the Mughals and incite hatred between

communities. Such horrid lies have been told from generation to generation. Trust me, such tales go around during every election.'

'I don't think my dadu would lie about it. In fact, he has also heard shrieks from the fort once,' Alia said.

'Whom did he vote for?' Venky asked sarcastically.

Alia did not respond to the question while everyone else had a good laugh at Venky's comment.

'Well, I will tell you something that my dadu told me,' proposed Meghna.

'You're from Kolkata, right?' asked Zafar.

'Yes!'

'Kolkata has plenty of haunted places. My friend once went on a ghost-walk in the city.'

'Well, I'm going to tell you about a place that your friend may not know about,' said Meghna. 'There is a house called Putulbari. It means House of Dolls in Bengali.'

'Sounds interesting,' Venky said, as he took a plate of grilled chicken from Zafar. 'Go on!'

'Well, Putulbari is located near the jetty, not far from Nimtala Ghat, which is also a haunted place. My dadu was an accountant, back in the day, and once he had to travel to Sovabazar for work. He had to collect a ledger from Bankim Ghosh, who lived near the Putulbari. But my poor dadu accidentally went inside the haunted house without knowing. The gate was open and he stepped inside, calling out for Bankim Babu. As he walked into the courtyard, he found the place deserted. There were cobwebs all around, and dolls of all shapes and sizes stared at him from the uppers levels. He felt claustrophobic and uncomfortable, but suddenly he started hearing the cries of a woman, followed by shrieks. The voice of the woman turned into a demonic one and started cursing dadu. He got scared and ran out of the house and on to the road. A passerby explained that nobody went inside the house. It was once the residence of babus who would sexually exploit young girls there and even killed some of them. The spirits of these girls still haunt the place, seeking justice. He got a fever after that and never ever set foot in the area again.'

'But don't people live there now?' Alia asked as she pulled out her cell phone, 'I think I have read about this on the internet too. Damn! No network,' she exclaimed stuffing the phone back into her pocket. 'But I will show it to you once we are in Gurgaon.'

'It's okay. A lot of these stories are available online,' Venky said.

'But, I swear, my dadu told me this a few years ago,' Meghna

argued.

'Nobody is questioning you, Meghna. Let's move on to the next one,' Venky said looking at Zafar, who was pulling out the next skewer.

'You are all talking about other people's accounts of haunting. Well, I will tell you something personal. This happened when I was three or four years old. We had just moved to a new house in Lucknow, which was located right next to a graveyard. One evening while I was coming back from the mosque with my father, we passed by the kabrasthan. Abba met a cousin on the way and he stopped awhile to chat with him. While talking with his cousin, he did not realize that I had wandered off. Both of them looked for me here and there and finally found me standing at the gate of the kabrasthan. He said that my head was glued to the gate as if I had got stuck while trying to pass through the gap between the rusted iron grills. I honestly do not remember the episode, but since my Abba would not lie to me I know it happened.

'That night my ammi caught me standing at the door, staring at it like a statue. She saw me muttering something and, when she put me to bed, I would stare at the door and growl. Later on, Abba mentioned to my mom that some jinn or spirit from the graveyard must have possessed me. Every time I growled from the bedroom, my Abba said that the radio in his room and all the lights would turn on and off. They called a fakir baba and he did something. He tied a taabeez around my neck,' Zafar said as he pulled out the locket tied to a black thread around his neck and showed it to his friends. 'This taabeez protects me from jinns and I have never taken it off since then.'

'Oooh … I see dead people!' Venky whispered in an eerie way, sarcastically imitating the famous dialogue from The Sixth Sense.

'Whatever, dude. I told you what I heard from my parents.'

'Don't you remember any of it?'

'No, I honestly don't. I was too young.'

'Fine! It's your turn, Venky,' Alia said as she bit into a juicy piece of chicken.

'Guys, will you excuse me for a moment? I think I left a packet of chicken in the car. Can I go and get it?' Zafar asked.

'Do you want me to come with you?' Meghna asked.

'It's okay, I will be alright,' said Zafar as he got up from his place.

'Of course, he is friends with the jinns. Right?' Venky joked.

'Shut up!' Zafar slapped Venky's head and left the campsite.

‘Come on, Venky. Tell us a story from your town.’

Venky pulled out his cell phone and then spoke into it, ‘Ok Google, tell me about the haunting of Sanjay Van.’

The cell phone beeped and displayed some results from the search engine.

‘Wait a minute! Isn’t this Sanjay Van? Is it haunted?’ Alia exclaimed in shock.

‘Yes, but wait till you hear the whole story.’ Venky laughed.

‘I thought it was a campsite,’ said Meghna as she moved closer to Alia.

‘Oh, look at you two scared cats. I have not even begun and you are cuddled up together.’

‘It’s not funny!’

‘Sanjay Van is known for all the wrong reasons,’ Venky started reading from the screen. ‘As per this blog, this dense forest houses a graveyard too and several vengeful spirits have been exorcized here. Evil spirits prey on unsuspecting people who wander into the forest—’

Venky stopped when all three of them heard a loud cry. It was Zafar. Venky, Alia and Meghna got up and rushed towards the sound. They saw Zafar lying on the ground. He was alive but his eyes were wide open with shock.

‘What happened, dude?’ Venky asked.

Zafar could not speak but he pointed a trembling hand towards a peepal tree on the right side. Venky, Alia and Meghna instinctively turned around to look at it and saw the most terrifying sight of their lives. Three people, a man and two women, were lying dead under the tree. It did not take them long to realize who they were. It was them! The three had been dead all this while.

Zafar, whose heart was still pounding, clutched at his tabeez.

That night Zafar discovered two things. Firstly, the taabeez had protected him from the evil that lurked in the forest. Second: he could, in fact, see dead people.

The Mahishi and the Prince of Pamba

Thirteenth century, Kerala

It was the most dreaded night of the decade and the moon appeared large and red. The sages called it the blood moon. They believed that the demons of Naraka grew powerful on such a night.

Three sages on the banks of the river Azhutha were performing a yajnya—the holy fire ritual. The ritual was to please Lord Shiva and Vishnu, so that they would protect humankind from a rakshasi called Mahishi. As the sages chanted mantras in front of the holy fire, a large shadow loomed over their heads, cutting off the light from the blood moon completely. The sages opened their eyes in horror for they knew exactly what had interrupted their ritual—it was the demoness Mahishi.

She roared and blew hot air through her large nostrils, which made the flames rise violently. Determined to complete the ritual, the sages sat and continued chanting. Mahishi took a giant leap and stepped on the holy fire, sending sparks in the air that fell on the bodies of the three sages. The fire was extinguished and Mahishi stabbed her horns through the ribs of the sages and tossed their dead bodies to the heavens. As the fire died, she

walked away into the forest.

The news about the demoness reached the king, who was worried. Many of his soldiers had already been slain by the powerful rakshasi. What worried him more was that his unsuspecting son, a prince, was out there in the jungle looking to obtain the milk of a tigress, which would cure his mother of her illness.

On the night after the blood moon, the prince saw a small cave near the river Azhutha and he decided to take a nap in the cave. Just as he was about to close his eyes, he heard the loud scream of a woman. Cautioned, he got out of the cave with his bow and arrows. The sound came from the southern side and assuming it was an injured person, the prince rushed towards the spot. But when he arrived there, all he could see was the half-eaten body of a deer lying near the foot of a large banyan tree. He heard footsteps behind the tree and the prince carefully moved around it. However, there was no one on the other side.

What he saw next was a terrifying figure: it was about the size of a human, but the head was shaped like a buffalo with large horns. Its face was covered in dull, dark scales. It was Mahishi, or the one with the buffalo's head. Mahishi began hissing and charged towards the prince. The prince hid behind the tree but soon felt like he was rising in the air. He realized that Mahishi had uprooted the banyan tree with her horns and was raising it in the air. The prince jumped from the tree and landed on the ground. He pulled out an arrow from his deck and shot at the monstrous creature.

Mahishi fell down, sending tremors through the ground.

It was believed that the rakshasi was actually a beautiful woman cursed by a sage, and when she was defeated by the prince, she was freed from the curse. Others say that the demoness was a vagabond who was hunting down the citizens of the kingdom out of vengeance. Either way, Mahishi, after her defeat surrendered herself to the prince.

'Do you have any last wish?' the prince asked.

'O prince,' she said, 'I wish to marry you.'

The prince, who had taken a vow of celibacy stated in a calm voice, 'I will not grant such a wish. But I promise you that the day I am forgotten by my subjects, I will accept your proposal. Until then, you may wait for me in this forest. Will you?'

'I will.'

The prince went on to achieve glory and retired as a celibate in the hills near the river Pamba in the Pathanamthitta district of

Kerala. A temple was constructed for him at the top of the hill, and as per his promise to the demoness, a temple was also constructed for Mahishi on the same hill. Millions of devotees take vows of celibacy and visit the shrine even today. It is said Mahishi waits for that day when devotees stop visiting the prince's temple. Some believe that the faint sounds of Mahishi can still be heard in the jungles around the hill-shrine.

Inspired by rumours of a haunted hospital in Shimla

The year was 1992 and Pyarelal and his wife, Harpreet Kaur, were living a decent middle-class life in Canada. They had not visited their home town in Kaithu since 1983. When Harpreet found out that her mother needed to undergo a major surgery within a week, she flew down from Ontario to Shimla. The moment she landed, she had started sneezing and her nose was blocked. Harpreet had been born and brought up there and was heading to the government hospital where she was born thirty years ago.

She arrived at the dusty hospital ward and was upset when she saw how frail her old mother had become. Still, there was mild satisfaction on her mother's wrinkled face when Harpreet held her in an embrace. The ward was unclean and typical of a small-town government hospital, and Harpreet was worried about the hygiene standards. She asked for a private room and, after some exchange of currency, she got it.

The room was still quite small and damp, and it appeared to have been neglected for many years. It had minimal facilities that included a rusty old ceiling fan, a tungsten bulb, a shabby bed accompanied by a stand for the drip and two chairs. The worst part was that there were no windows. Harpreet sneezed loudly

the moment she stepped into the room. The orderly, who brought Harpreet's mother in on a wheelchair, seemed reluctant to enter it. He helped the old woman on to the bed and started walking towards the door.

'Madam, the nurse will be here shortly,' he said and then looked at the ceiling.

'What happened?' Harpreet asked.

'No, nothing. Just do not open the door to anyone after midnight.'

'Why?'

'For safety,' he said before leaving. Harpreet dismissed it as a general reminder. She noticed that the switches were very old and might have faulty wiring. When she tried switching on the light, it flickered for some time before it steadily glowed its dim yellow.

Sometime later, a nurse arrived and adjusted the drip and made the old woman lie down for a routine blood-pressure check.

The old woman fell asleep soon after the nurse left. Harpreet felt sad when she looked at her mother. She felt suddenly lonely and wished her husband could have been beside her, consoling her in her hour of need.

The doctor had mentioned that the chances of saving her mother were very low and she had been anxious ever since. She kept staring at her sleeping old mother until she herself dozed off.

Hours passed and the calm evening darkened into a stormy night. Harpreet Kaur woke to the sound of thunder. The light inside the room was still glowing, but the ceiling fan had stopped. It started getting hot inside the room and her sleeping mother was tossing and turning restlessly in her bed. Harpreet started feeling suffocated and decided to complain to the floor warden about the ceiling fan. She got up from the chair and walked out of the room.

A storm was raging outside, and as she walked through the deserted corridor, the tube lights started flickering. Harpreet never liked hospitals, especially after visiting hours, because it would fill her mind with thoughts of illness and death. The very thought of blood gave her a strong urge to throw up, and the smell of phenyl made it worse. At the end of the corridor, she saw a nurse whom she had not seen before.

'Sister, I'm looking for the warden.'

'I'm sorry, but the warden is on leave. Tell me what happened?' the nurse spoke in a tired monotone.

'The ceiling fan stopped working.'

'I don't think we can do anything about that right now. I will get it checked tomorrow.'

'What do you mean tomorrow? I paid two hundred rupees extra for the room and you are telling me that I have to bear with the inconvenience of nearly suffocating till morning?' Harpreet said.

'Keep your voice down, there are patients here. There is nothing I can do. It is a government hospital. If you are so rich, then you should have admitted your mother to a private hospital,' the nurse replied arrogantly.

'You know what? That is exactly what I am going to do first thing tomorrow.'

'Great!'

'I would like to make a trunk call.'

'You have to go downstairs, to the reception. We cannot bring the phone to your room,' the nurse said and walked away.

Harpreet felt like slapping her for being so rude and unhelpful. She turned back and marched downstairs. When she arrived at the reception, she realized the phone line was down due to the thunderstorm.

'This country will never develop!' Harpreet shouted at the man sitting at the front desk and went back to her room on the first floor.

'I'm going to sue these cheats tomorrow!' Harpreet told herself angrily as she walked up the stairs.

'Why would you waste your time on that?' said a low-pitched male voice from behind her, in Punjabi.

'Excuse me?'

Harpreet turned and saw a short man in a polo T-shirt. He had a straight face with absolutely no expression.

'Who are you?'

'It doesn't matter, but you seem new here. When did you depart?' the man asked in English with a strong Punjabi accent.

'You mean to ask "when did I arrive"?'

'Same to same!'

'I arrived this afternoon. My mother is admitted here but look at my fate. They have provided such a third-class room and the staff is not even helpful,' the NRI complained.

'Well, this place is like that, but I would not blame the staff. They were very sweet once.'

'So what happened to them?'

'They got bored of this endless cycle. You are new here, so I do

not expect you to understand. But eventually, you will.'

'Oh no, I'm not going to stay here. I am going to take my mother to a private hospital first thing in the morning.'

'I bet you won't. I tried too but I have been here for the last one month. Others have been here longer.'

'We will see.'

'You really don't understand, do you?' the man asked as the two arrived at the first floor.

'Look, mister, if you can help me fix the ceiling fan in my room then talk to me, otherwise just leave me alone. Got it?' Harpreet fumed.

Harpreet turned away from the man and started towards her room. There was more thunder outside and she could hear the sound of the howling wind too, clearer than ever. The lights were still flickering as she walked through the corridor. The she started hearing footsteps behind her. She stopped to check but there was no one in the corridor except for her. Harpreet walked on and soon heard footsteps again. This time, she turned and found the nurse standing behind her.

'You cannot go back to the room,' the nurse said in her monotone.

'Oh really? What will you do?' Harpreet asked.

'Nothing. But you should not. I would not go in there if I were you.'

'Go to hell!'

Harpreet opened the door and entered the room where her mother was still sleeping quite peacefully, even in the heat. However, what Harpreet saw next left her speechless—slouched over on the chair was her own lifeless body. She had died in her sleep and had woken up as a spirit. When she walked out of the room in shock, she saw a line of people or, more accurately, spirits of those who had died in the hospital: the arrogant nurse, the man, the receptionist and a dozen others.

'Welcome to the club,' the man said. 'You are free to roam these corridors forever.'

That was when Harpreet realized what the man had meant when he asked her about when she had 'departed'.

The Brahmarakshas of Nallamala

Manasa was a senior software developer working for an MNC in Hyderabad. Unlike her colleagues, who were placed in the company from college campuses, she was the only one to have worked there for seven years. She was happy with her job and gave everything to it. She was also on the brink of a big promotion, and therefore, had sacrificed her Diwali vacations to complete the project assigned to her.

Three months and a promotion later, Manasa was preparing for a long Christmas weekend. She enjoyed packing her bags and driving off to remote places in her Jeep Compass, switching her mobile phone to flight mode so that she could unplug and relax in the lap of Mother Nature. Her last outing had been seven months ago, when she trekked all the way to the top of Doddabetta peak in Tamil Nadu. This time, she was on her way to Nallamala hills in Andhra Pradesh. The hills did not get adequate rainfall, therefore, the forests were not covered with large trees. It made for a convenient trekking experience, especially for one travelling solo.

After leaving her bags in a homestay in Cumbum, she started her way upwards through the thella maddi habitation at about two in the afternoon. Manasa's goal was to touch Ugra Sthambam before sunset, and the way she was climbing, she would be done even before that. She met dozens of other adventurers as well, some of them solo while others trekking in groups. Manasa was not there to socialize, and she had very strict policies regarding

mingling with strangers, so she declined requests for company—especially from single men.

Nearly five hours later, Manasa found herself inside a dense forest area. She had lost her way and somehow wandered into an isolated part of the Nallamala forest. The light was fading and in a few minutes, she would be trapped in complete darkness. What was worse was the fact that the hills were known for wild dogs and panther sightings, and she knew that very well. Her whole idea of a weekend away from people was going to backfire as she feared that she would never see another person again.

As Manasa looked around, trying to retrace her steps, she heard rustling sounds from behind her. She quickly aimed her flashlight at the bushes from where it came. Suddenly, she heard the sound from above, as if a wild beast had jumped from one branch to another. She looked up, but there was nothing there except for leaves, still shaking from the recent movement. She hoped it was not a panther. Manasa's heart raced. Suddenly, she heard calm and disturbingly steady breathing closing in on her from the left. She closed her eyes and prayed as the breathing came so close to her left ear, that she could feel the being inspecting her.

'You should not have come here. It is a restricted place,' said a raspy male voice.

Manasa opened her eyes and saw a thin, young tribal boy with a small wooden box.

'I am sorry. I thought…'

'You thought I was a panther,' the boy said.

'Yes!'

'Wild animals should be the least of your concern in these parts, my sister.' He chuckled and continued, 'I told you that this is a restricted place. It is the shrine of our guardian. Non-believers are not allowed here,' he said as if he knew that she was an atheist.

'I'm sorry, but I did not know about any shrine.'

'No, only we know about it and we would like to keep it that way. Nobody enters our territory.'

'I would like to leave, but I don't know the way. I'm lost,' she confessed.

'Just go that way,' the boy said pointing towards the east. 'You will reach your destination in an hour. Unless it hunts you down.'

'The panther?' Manasa asked nervously.

The boy smirked and walked towards the bushes with the wooden box. Manasa did as the boy had instructed. She walked

downhill and within an hour she reached Cumbum.

At the home stay.

The lady of the house was a nice middle-aged woman. Her husband was out on duty for the night while her two-year-old son was a cute little delight to play with. She prepared delicious dosai in the night for her guest from the city.

'Our last guest was also from Hyderabad. He was working with Gantom,' the lady from the village mentioned as she scraped a dosai from the pan.

'You mean Quantum. Well, yes there are many IT companies in Hyderabad and most of us like to get out of the city once in a while. You know,' Manasa confessed while receiving the dosai on her steel plate. 'We envy the calm and peace of the countryside. And we definitely do not get such fresh dosai back in Hyderabad, unless our mothers are living with us.'

'So, your mother-in-law doesn't make Dosai at home?' the woman asked.

'I'm not married. I live alone.'

'What? But you must be well above twenty-six?' The woman said.

'Well, what can I say. I have chevvaidosham,' Manasa joked about the one thing in her horoscope that kept her from finding south Indian grooms from her community. 'So, unless I find a boy

from my community with the same dosham, I won't be getting married anytime soon.'

'I am sure you will find a charming and handsome man soon.'

'Oh, trust me, I'm better off single. By the way,' Manasa changed the subject, 'what's with the people on the hills? I saw a boy who said that there was a shrine or something there where non-believers are not allowed.'

'Yes, it's a sacred place for them. They've been protecting everyone in the village and the vicinity by keeping the shrine clean and pure.'

'I don't understand how our religion works. Why are non-believers called impure? If there is a God then that God is for all, right?'

'Because it's not a god.'

'Then?'

'It's the shrine of a…' her voice dropped to a whisper, 'brahmarakshas!'

'What?'

'Long ago, there lived a learned Brahmin by the name of Tunga Rao. He used to spend months meditating in the forest. However, one day while meditating, a tribal woman passed by. She tripped and fell on a thorny bush. Her scream brought Tunga out of his meditation. Tunga got up and helped her to her feet. She was thankful and attractive, and he was drawn to her. The two gave in to their lust and he broke his vow of celibacy. However, they were caught in the act by the tribal leader who separated the two and, along with others, stoned Tunga to death.

'Since Tunga was a Brahmin who strayed from his path of celibacy and died an untimely death, he was cursed to roam the forest as a brahmarakshas—a mighty cannibalistic beast with an insatiable desire to sin. Soon after, women started disappearing from the tribe as well as villages in the foothills. They called a priest, who trapped the creature in a stone that was then placed in the hills. The tribal folk took on the responsibility of looking after the shrine. As long as it receives an offering of deer meat every fortnight and non-believers are kept out of the area, the creature will not return.'

'Wow, that's a great story. Someone should write about it,' Manasa exclaimed with goosebumps.

'It might be a story to you, but we believe in it and do not go near it. I hope you did not trespass.'

'I don't believe in any of that, but tell me: what does this beast

look like?'

'It has been centuries since anyone has seen it and lived to tell. So, we do not know.'

'Interesting.'

'I hope you get back safely,' the woman said, deeply concerned.

'I'll be okay, but I really need to sleep now.' Manasa got up and handed over the plate to the woman. 'Thanks for the dosai.'

Minutes before Midnight.

Manasa was sleeping in the small guest room while the woman of the house was asleep with her child in the main bedroom. From her bed, Manasa could see her parked car through the window. She switched off the lights after reading a few short stories by Roald Dahl. She drifted into a world of cakes, candies and serpents very soon but her sleep was broken by the cries of the child. The sound stopped in a few minutes, but Manasa could not go back to sleep. She kept thinking about her plan for the next day. She was so tempted to visit the restricted area, but did not want to disrespect anyone. She would not be able to look the kind lady in the eye with that kind of guilt.

What was her name again? Manasa had forgotten the woman's name.

Was it Supriya or Suprada?

While she dug deep into her mind to fetch the woman's name,

she was startled by a thud, which came from the top of her Jeep. She got out of bed, rushed to the window and looked outside. She noticed two dents on top of the Jeep.

Was it a branch or an animal? She wondered, looking through the window. The night was calm and everything was still as a portrait. She sighed at the damage and turned back when she heard the sound again. This time it was louder. When Manasa got to the window, she saw a shadow behind the Jeep—dark in the light of the moon. The shadow was extraordinarily long and looked two-legged but definitely not human. The tips of the fingers were quite clear in the shadow and they were long and pointed. The shadow moved out of sight.

The silence was heavy until, suddenly, a hideous creature appeared in front of her. It had soulless green eyes, large fangs, arms longer than legs, claws and a pointed tail.

Manasa screamed and slammed the window shut. The creature's hand smashed through the shutters as it started pushing through the window. Cracks started appearing on the walls. Manasa ran out of the room with her Jeep's key. She did not even wait to inform the woman of the house as she ran out and got into her vehicle. Finally, she drove out of the village at a high speed.

Two days later, Manasa was back at work. During her break, she was going through the pages of the local newspaper when her eyes fell upon a striking headline: 'Serial Killer Murders Two in Cumbum.' Right below the headline was a line that shocked her: Victims were both residents of Cumbum—Suvarna and her two-

year-old son.

Suvarna. Never again would she forget that name.

Acknowledgements

Writing is my meditation.

The journey that started in 2012 with baby steps has seen many characters come and go. However, only few of them stayed with me, thus, being pillars of strength in this journey. Humble gratitude to my wife, mother and father for believing in me, and keeping my spirits up and running.

I must thank my Dodda for telling me all those spooky tales about Yakshis and Prethas. Truly, it was because of her bedtime stories that I developed this fascination for ghosts and spooks.

Thanks to Mrs Anju Joshi and the entire DAVPS Gurgaon family for their constant encouragement. Thanks to my mentor, Mr Sangeeth Sivan for his constant encouragement and accurate guidance. Over the course of years, the stories of Roald Dahl, Satyajit Ray, E.V. Lucas, Arthur Conan Doyle and Oscar Wilde have inspired me to write. I am forever indebted to the masters! Whether the characters are real or surreal it is the writer's duty to breathe life into them. Knowingly and unknowingly, the inspiration for these characters is derived from people I meet in real life. Thanks to them.

A lot of research went into writing this book. A huge chunk of the preliminary information came from the world wide web. Thank you Google and Wikipedia for making my job easier. Some of the stories were inspired by casual conversations about the supernatural and the unknown with some really interesting

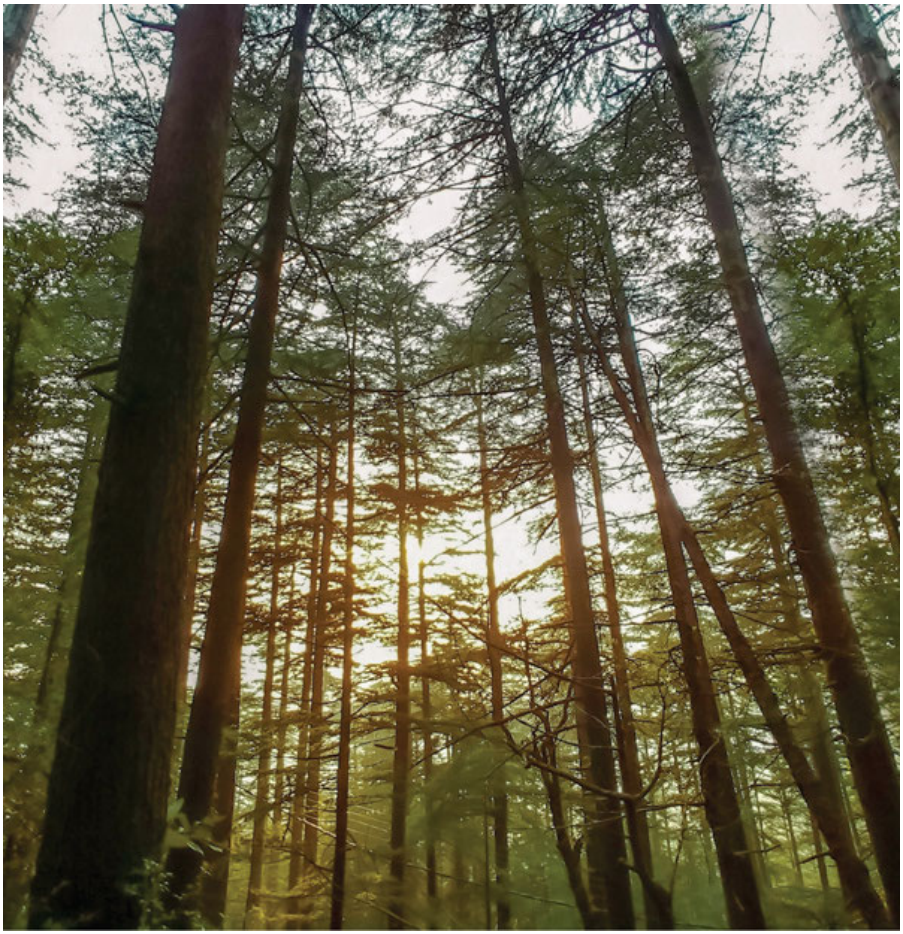
people—Aishwarya Rao, Arjun Thanthri, Vigneshwaran Jothi, Shashi Aunty and K. Jayarama.

And last … and perhaps the most important person to thank would be Prerna Gill, my editor, because of whom this ambitious project has become a reality.

Chail; July 30, 2019

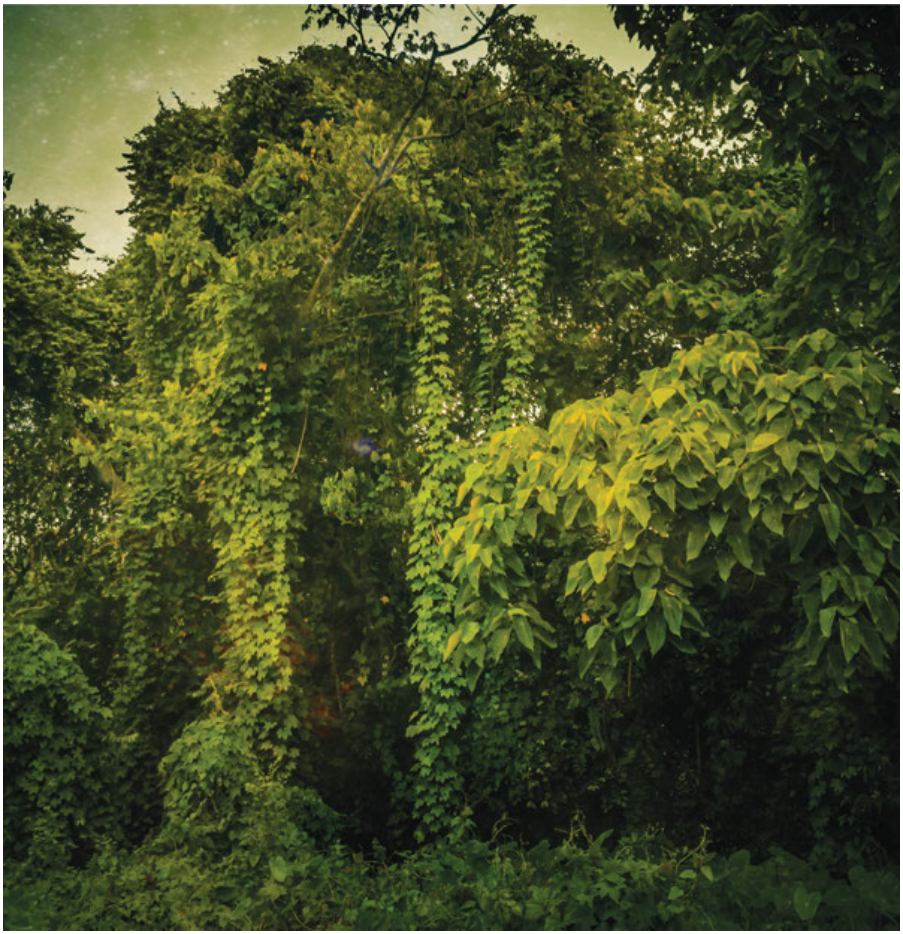
The stairs where the possessed woman was spotted, Belman

The halli in South Canara, where the asura's spirit stalks travellers



A haunted forest in Kurseoung

An eerie forest in Shimla



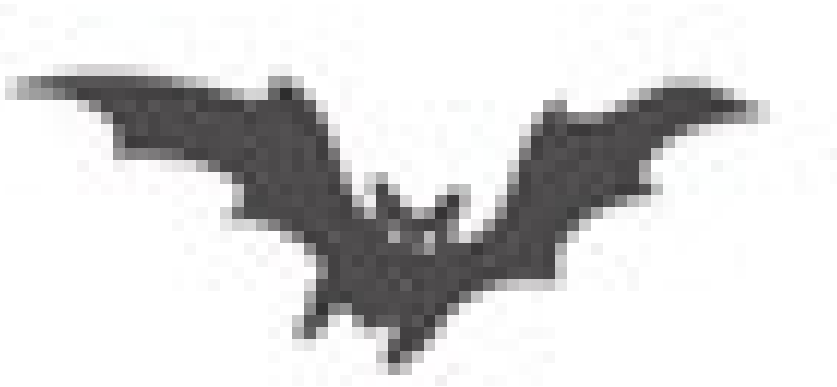
A forest said to be haunted by a yakshi, Thrissur

A path rumoured to be haunted by a spectral enchantress in South Canara

Chudail Baudi, Shimla

An old house said to be haunted by a yakshi, Thrissur

About the Book



Proceed with caution. This is what nightmares are made of.

The dreaded Bhangarh Fort and its cursed rani…

The restless spirits of Malabar Hill and its Tower of Silence…

Jammu and Kashmir's notorious Khooni Nala, which still claims lives in mysterious road accidents…

These are places where the past lingers, making shapes in the moonlight, calling out from the darkness.

K. Hari Kumar, bestselling author of spinechilling horror fiction, brings you terrifying tales of some of India's most haunted places. Whether you read them at night or in daylight, these unforgettable stories will haunt you long after you've turned the last page.

Harikumar Krishnamoorthy, better known as K. Hari Kumar, is an Indian novelist and screenwriter born in Cochin and brought up in the suburbs of Gurgaon. He has written four popular books, When Strangers Meet (2013), That Frequent Visitor (2015), The Anunnaki Messenger (2016) and The Other Side of Her (2018).

Desiblitz, a UK-based online magazine, called Hari one of the top horror writers of India. He is the first Indian horror writer to be listed on Amazon.com's top 50 bestsellers in the paranormal and horror category. K. Hari Kumar has also written the screenplay for the Malayalam Feature Film, E (2017) and the Hindi web-series Bhram (2019), which is inspired by his book The Other Side of Her.

He quit his corporate job in 2017 to devote his entire time to writing about and exploring the supernatural and the unknown. When he is not writing or travelling, he likes to spend time at his countryside home.

Harper
Collins

TALK TO US

Join the conversation on Twitter
http://twitter.com/HarperCollinsIN

Like us on Facebook to find and share posts about our books with your friends
http://www.facebook.com/HarperCollinsIndia

Follow our photo stories on Instagram
http://instagram.com/harpercollinsindia/

Get fun pictures, quotes and more about our books on Tumblr
http://www.tumblr.com/blog/harpercollinsindia

First published in India in 2019 by HarperCollins Publishers in 2019
A-75, Sector 57, Noida, Uttar Pradesh 201301, India
www.harpercollins.co.in

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Copyright © K. Hari Kumar 2019
Photographs courtesy the author

P-ISBN: 978-93-5357-355-3
Epub Edition © October 2019 ISBN: 978-93-5357-356-0

The views and opinions expressed in this book are the author's own and the facts are as reported by her, and the publishers are not in any way liable for the same.

K. Hari Kumar asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved under The Copyright Act, 1957. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse-engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins Publishers India.

Cover design © HarperCollins Publishers India Cover photograph: K. Hari Kumar

www.harpercollins.co.in

HarperCollins Publishers A-75, Sector 57, Noida, Uttar Pradesh 201301, India 1 London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF, United Kingdom Hazelton Lanes, 55 Avenue Road, Suite 2900, Toronto, Ontario M5R 3L2
and 1995 Markham Road, Scarborough, Ontario M1B 5M8, Canada

25 Ryde Road, Pymble, Sydney, NSW 2073, Australia

195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007, USA